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DETECTIVE DODGE



OR,

The Mystery of Frank Hearty.

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AUTHOR OF "WILL WIDFIRE," "PICAYUNE
PETE," "DETECTIVE DICK," "HAND-
SOME HARRY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

TWO SURPRISING OFFERS.

THE scene of our story is laid in the great city of New York, in the thrilling and throbbing heart of that mighty metropolis, with its swarming multitudes, and its endless tale of mingled virtue and crime.

We must ask the reader to accompany us into one of the busy marts of trade, a great wholesale business establishment, crowded with goods, and vital with activity.

BEFORE HER THE TUNNEL APPEARED TO RAPIDLY NARROW, AND IN ITS NARROWEST PORTION APPEARED A HUMAN HEAD.

We are here concerned, however, only with two persons, who occupy the private office of this establishment.

One of these is a prominent member of the firm, Mr. Julius Marsden, a tall, somewhat slender, thin-faced person, with a smiling, good-natured expression, though with something secretive in the twinkle of his small eyes.

The other is a well-grown boy, a gracefully-formed and rather handsome lad, though dressed in a sadly-worn and not very clean garb, that seems out of place with the situation.

He may be sixteen or may be twenty years of age. He is small enough for the one, and wide-awake enough for the other.

It needs but a glance to see that he has been abroad in the world, and has had his greenness pretty well rubbed off, and that, though he may know little about books, he is well up in the very useful education of the streets.

His very attitude, as he stands in the presence of the rich merchant, erect, saucy, independent, with his greasy hat on his head, and his foot planted carelessly on the round of a chair, marks the Yankee lad that would stand unabashed in the throne-room of a king.

The merchant eyed him closely and curiously as he spoke.

"Frank Hearty, you say? That's a good name. I like the sound of it."

"Good enough, I reckon," answered Frank indifferently. "Good as I am, I s'pose; and that ain't much of a brag."

"And you tell me your parents don't live in New York?"

"Dunno where they live. Never see'd 'em. B'en boardin' round 's long back as I kin remember."

"Well, well, well. A poor, deserted stray; or an orphan, perhaps."

"Reckon I kin hoe my own row, and rattle my own bones. Don't see what I want with parients. If any boy o' my own size tries to set down on me, you bet there's an earthquake. I git grub enough to eat, too; so what's the odds?"

"You seem to be independent, my boy."

"Kind o' ragged and sassy, that's all. Guess I'll git, sir, if you've had your talk out. I ain't got nothin' I want to say back."

Frank turned and walked toward the door, heedless of the look of anger that flashed across the merchant's sallow face.

"Stay!" cried the latter hastily. "I did not say I was done."

"You'll have to come to the p'int then," answered Frank independently. "I got another contract to fill. When you axed me to come here, you said it was biz; and I'm biz to the backbone."

"You're an old con for so young a lad," rejoined Mr. Marsden with a laugh. "Well, since you are so sharp to the mark we will come down to business. I have been watching you for some time, Frank."

"What fur?" was the quick reply. "I ain't done nothin' as I'm ashamed of."

"No, no. It is something that you may be proud of. I have noticed your quickness, sharpness and diligence, and have tested your wit and honesty more than you fancy. I have a notion that you could be trusted to do a job without written instructions, and that you have not a lazy bone in your body."

"I used to have some," admitted Frank with a pleased look, "but I've worn 'em all out, and only left the spry ones. Dunno, though, 'bout t'other thing. Git things twisted mighty queer sometimes, and don't half try."

"I'll tell you now what I asked you to come here for," remarked Mr. Marsden in a business-like manner. "You're alive for business, and there you just hit my mark. I want a young man in my office, a bustling, active, sharp, wide-awake lad, whom I can trust to do a thing just as he is told, and hold his tongue as closely as a marble statue."

"I don't b'lieve I'll fill that bill," answered Frank, very indifferently. "When I take a notion to have some fun I drop bizness like a hot 'tater. And, talk 'bout talkin'! Why, I kin spin street yarns faster nor an old sailor. You jist oughter hear me when my tongue gits 'iled."

"No matter about that," laughed Mr. Marsden. "I am satisfied that you can keep a secret if you are told to, and that is all I want. See here, Frank, I have it in view to make a man of you. You have the stuff for it. I intend to place you in a post of confidence, above others who might claim it. There will be jealousy, but I fancy you can handle that."

"I should smile if I couldn't. Don't keer fer nothin' on two legs, I don't. But I rather guess I won't take that job."

"You won't? Why not?" demanded the merchant, in a quick tone.

"Too confin'g," answered the boy, in a careless tone. "Been used to keepin' my own hours and 'rowlin' round jist to suit my own notions. Don't reckon I keer to run in harness. What's more, I'm on the lookout fur snacks. 'Spect to make a ten strike some day. Don't b'lieve in saltin' myself down in a pickle-barrel when I've got the whole ocean to swim in."

Mr. Marsden looked at his independent visitor with a gaze that contained some hidden anger. But he smoothed his voice down to good-humor before answering:

"So you expect to pick up a fortune in the street? I tell you what, my boy, the days when the streets were paved with gold and diamonds are past. It is the tramp that graduates from the street college in these days. I intend to pay you a living salary, give you good hours and enough of holidays and push you up hill as fast as you are fit to go. And that's a chance not many boys like you can get."

There was a shrewd look in the boy's eyes as he listened to this tempting programme. He shrugged his shoulders carelessly as he replied:

"It's got its good p'int, Mr. Marsden. But it ain't all good p'int. You dunno how I like bein' my own boss, like I've always been. Ain't goin' to say yes or no right plump off. I want time to turn it over. Got to have a confab with the curbstones 'fore I kin come down to dots."

"Why, you saucy youngster, one would think I was asking a favor instead of offering one. Take care you don't lose the best chance you are likely ever to have. You are not the only boy I have my eyes on."

"All right," rejoined the young philosopher. "If you find anybody as wants the job wuss than I do, hand it over. It'll save me the trouble o' makin' up my mind."

"No, no!" cried the merchant, hastily. "I have given you the chance and I won't withdraw it. And somehow I've set my fancy on you."

"I ain't right sure as I've sot mine on you," rejoined Frank, turning carelessly as if to go. "Got to think it over. I'll drop round to-morrow, and say yes or no. Guess I won't take up no more o' your vallyble time to-day."

The independent gamin walked to the door, as coolly as if he had offers of this kind ever day of his life. He paused for an instant in the doorway.

"I s'pose there ain't nothin' else to say?"

"No. Good-day. I will look for you to-morrow," answered Mr. Marsden with a show of indifference.

Frank shut the door behind him. He had no sooner done so than a marked change passed over the merchant's face.

"The saucy vagabond!" he hissed. "I never yet came so near flinging anybody out of the window. But you must play your cards skillfully in this game, Julius Marsden. There is too high a stake involved for you to let a trump card escape your hand."

As for Frank, he seemed to have thrown the whole subject from his mind as soon as he left the office. He walked through the store, heedless of the heaped-up wealth it contained, or of the bustle of its inmates. There was a swagger of independence in his step.

"It's all mighty nice," he said to himself. "But it's just as nice to be yer own boss. Anyhow I got that down fine, and I'll go see 'bout t'other contrack. Talk 'bout bizness! Never had so many big jobs on hand at once in my life afore."

An hour afterward found the boy in one of the aristocratic up-town streets of New York, ringing the bell of a showy mansion.

A servant responded. Frank handed him a card.

"I reckon this is the place I was axed to call at."

The servant looked curiously at him, and then at the card.

"Does Mr. Bidding want to see you?"

"It looks that way. I know as I ain't over-flowin' anxious to see him."

"Step in. I will announce you," said the servant, masking a smile.

Leaving Frank in the hall he withdrew. In a few moments he returned, with a more respectful manner. He gazed at Frank as if trying to make out something that puzzled him.

"Please walk this way, sir. Mr. Bidding will see you."

"Thought as how he would," answered Frank, as he followed.

Very shortly afterward a door was opened, and Frank was ushered into an apartment more

gorgeous than any he had ever seen in his utmost dreams.

Richly carpeted and upholstered, pictures on the walls and statuettes on the mantles, a sheen of bright colors and gleaming lights and shades, it is not surprising that the boy stopped and gazed around as if he had just rubbed an Aladdin's lamp, and brought up the splendors of fairy land.

"How do you like the effect, my boy?" spoke a voice from the opposite side of the apartment.

Frank's quick glance shot across, and now for the first time he beheld, standing by the mantle, a portly, handsome, fashionably-dressed gentleman, whose well-cut lips wore a somewhat satirical smile.

"Kinder gay," answered the boy, as if a little ashamed to have been thrown "off his base."

He dropped into an easy-chair before him, flung his hat on the velvet-covered table, and assumed a somewhat forced air of indifference.

"You axed me to drop round, Mr. Bidding, and I've dropped."

"So it seems," remarked the gentleman, as he stepped forward to the opposite side of the table. "I fancy it is not often that you drop into a place like this."

"Not more'n once a week," answered the ready-witted gamin. "I don't b'lieve I keer fur too much o' this sort o' thing. Guv me bricks and stones upholstered with sunshine, and I won't ax nothin' better."

Mr. Bidding laughed in a broad, good-natured manner.

"You are not to be bribed by fine furniture, you born vagrant," he declared. "Would you not like to have your home in a mansion like this, with plenty of good food, soft beds to sleep in, money in your pocket, and nothing to do except to enjoy life?"

"I s'pose I might stand a little of it, if it wasn't piled on too fast," rejoined Frank. "But I reckon it wasn't fur that kind o' stuff you axed me to come here, Mr. Bidding."

"Stranger things have happened, my boy," answered the gentleman, pleasantly. "Men have risen from the gutter to the highest rank. Fortune favors those who are worthy of its favors. Take yourself, for instance: you are a stray of the streets, an orphan, not knowing even who were your parents, dressed in rags, and destitute of money. But, on the other hand, you have a good figure and a handsome face. You have a good brain, are quick-witted, industrious, honest and brave. These are the qualities to command success."

"It's you that's braggin' now. 'Tain't me. I'd kick myself if I let out any sich taffy."

"It is the truth," remarked Mr. Bidding, seriously. "I have had my eye on you for months, and know you better than you know yourself."

"Been watchin' me!" cried Frank, hastily. "Looks as if everybody was watchin' me. I'd like to know what fur."

"For a purpose, I promise you that. Look at me. I am rich, and ought to be happy, but I am not."

"I don't see what's in the way of it, 'cept yer vittals don't agree, or somethin' o' that sort."

"I am lonely, my boy. I have few friends and no one to whom I feel nearer ties. My life has long been a dreary one, and I am tired of it, and intend to change it. That is why I sent for you."

"What do you want o' me?" demanded Frank, his eyes as big as saucers.

"I have tested you well, and find that you are just what I have been seeking. It is my wish, Frank Hearty, to adopt you as my son, and the heir to my fortune."

Had a thunderbolt struck Frank he could not have started more violently. He sprang from his chair so suddenly as to send it rolling over the floor.

"Cracky!" he cried, with a stare of astonishment. "It looks as if it was rainin' rice-puddin's to-day, and they was all a-tumblin' square on my head!"

CHAPTER II.

A CHAT WITH DETECTIVE DODGE.

FROM the counting-house down-town and the aristocratic mansion up-town, we must now seek a dingy and sparsely-furnished apartment in the central region of the city.

It has a writing-table in the center, strewn with papers and provided with pens and ink. Against the wall stands an upright desk, its many pigeon-holes stuffed full of documents.

Maps of the city adorn the walls, alternated with portraits of vicious-faced characters, who form a sort of "rogues' gallery."

Frank Hearty is one of the inmates of this room. He is seated beside the table, with his

chair tilted well back, and one foot on the table's edge.

Opposite him sits a personage in a still more free-and-easy attitude. He has both feet on the table, his coat off, and a meerschaum between his lips, from which he at intervals sends up thick puffs of smoke.

A small-framed but wiry individual with smooth-shaven face, taut features, and eyes as sharp as corkscrews when he looks straight at you—which he does not often do—such is our portrait of Mr. Timothy Dodge, or Detective Dodge, if we may present him in character.

He is one of the many friends whom Frank has picked up in his active years of city life.

The boy's free-and-easy impudence of manner amuses the detective, who sits looking at him with a grim smile.

"Well, little 'possum, what brings you here to-day?" he asked, with an affected gruffness of manner.

"Biz," rejoined Frank. "Queer biz, too. Do you want me to tack round it, or plug it out squar?"

"Don't you know the way I have with long-winded people?" asked the detective as he puffed out a cloud of smoke. "I give them their choice between hanging and drowning, and ten seconds by the watch to decide."

"Short meter's the word, then," rejoined Frank. "My biz is jist this, Mr. Dodge. I do odd jobs fur a good many folks, you know."

"If I know, what's the use of telling me?"

"Well, I've done a good deal lately fur two gentlemen. One of 'em's a merchant. Deals in indigo and spices, and sich sort o' truck. T'other's a Fifth-avenuer, with money enough to shingle a meetin'-house. They've both been hangin' round and pilin' the jobs on me. And not a bit mean 'bout it, neither."

"Well, t'other day they both axed me to call on 'em. One wanted me to come to his private office, and t'other one to his house. Didn't say what fur. I went yesterday to both on 'em. And you bet I got struck all of a heap. They most took my breath away."

The detective fixed his keen eyes on Frank's open face. He took the pipe from his lips and sent out a cloud of smoke.

"Well!" he asked. "What then? Cut it short, mind you."

The boy proceeded, in very brief terms, to relate the results of the two interviews, which we have described in the preceding chapter.

As he went on Mr. Dodge lost his careless look and listened with growing interest.

"That's a confoundedly queer story," he interrupted. "You're sure they weren't chaffing you?"

"Not much. I done all the chaffin'. They was mighty solid 'bout it."

"Well, wind up. What did you tell Mr. Bidding?"

"That's what I'm a-comin' to. You bet he upset me bad. Arter I got back to my level I let him talk. He wants to send me to school, and dress me up gay, and put money in my pocket, and I'm to be a young gentleman, and cut away from all my ragged company, and a lot more o' sich gammon."

"What did you say to that?"

"I told him the cat wouldn't jump."

"You didn't refuse?"

"Not more'n half. I said as I wasn't no hog, to go back on my old friends, an' I wouldn't do it fer nobody. I said next that I wouldn't wear no dandy rig, and have the boys call me a dude. And I said to wind up, that it took a good deal o' room to hold me, and that I was never at home 'cept out o' doors. I'd sooner live on cabbage-stalks my own way than on ice-cream and jumbles anybody else's way."

"You impertinent street rat!" growled the detective. "That settled your hash."

"Not much!" answered Frank triumphantly.

"He wants me back, I kin see that. He played big a bit, but he couldn't shut up my optics."

"Go on. How did it all end?"

"Jest like t'other. I didn't say yes or no. Told him I'd give him an answer to-day. Didn't jist feel like b-in' 'dopted."

"Well, you're a cool one, to kick up your heels like an untamed colt at a double chance of fortune."

"It was all such a queer dodge," proceeded Frank. "I couldn't help thinkin' there was a rat somewhere in the woodpile. I ain't quite a fool, and I played careless a-purpose to see if they was in solid earnest. I wanted to git your pinion 'fore I said yes or no."

Detective Dodge returned his pipe to his lips, and puffed away in silence for several minutes. He finally removed it, and said briefly:

"Your head's level, youngster."

"That ain't no news," answered Frank in the same brief tone.

The detective renewed his smoking. Finally he laid his pipe on the table and said:

"Give me those names again."

He wrote them down carefully, with the addresses, as Frank repeated them.

"That will do. Wait here till I return."

Taking the slip of paper, Dodge left the room. He evidently was not going far, for he did not put on his coat.

His gamin visitor, nothing abashed, took possession of the still smoking meerschaum, helped himself to a newspaper, and proceeded to make himself comfortable.

Twenty minutes passed away. Then he was aroused from his interest in the proceedings of Congress by a short, sharp laugh behind him.

"You've got gall, youngster," came in the voice of the detective. "Drop that pipe, now, or I'll burst your cocoanut."

"Been keepin' it lit fer you," answered Frank, as he hastily laid it down.

The detective resumed his chair.

"I've been looking through the records," he remarked. "Neither of these men are on our books. Yet I'll swear they are up to something more than plain sailing. I must get my eye on them. I will manage an interview in some way. There's nothing like getting the smell of rascals."

"And what am I to do?"

"Accept their offers—both of them. And keep mum. You know how to hold your tongue without having a chain cable spliced to it?"

"Well, I rayer calculate."

"Do you think these men are in collusion? Did you ever see them together?"

"Nary time. Always seen one of 'em up-town and t'other one down-town."

"Then don't let either know that you have had an offer from the other. Accept both their propositions, and try and fill both positions."

"How am I to do that?"

"You've got to work that out of your own brains. If you ain't smart enough to do it yourself, nothing I can say will be worth a pinch of snuff."

"All right, I'll do it," declared Frank, resolutely. "I'll try, anyhow. Don't you think there's a crow somewhere in the cornfield, Mr. Dodge?"

"Yes, and a big one. Two men of this stamp do not take so much trouble to make the fortune of a street boy without something big and ugly behind it. What that is it is my business to find out. It is impossible that two men could separately have taken such a benevolent idea. If they are working in collusion so much the worse. You say you never knew your father and mother, Frank?"

"Never see'd 'em. Was brung up in the street and weaned on cobble-stones."

"Tell me all you remember of your childhood."

Frank proceeded to do so. But the story was a very thin and meager one, with no points in it which seemed of importance to the experienced officer.

He growled to himself as Frank concluded:

"The waters run deep," he said. "So much the better. I am tired of shallow waters. That will do, boy. You know your programme."

"If it's in the wood I'll fetch it out," answered the confident boy, as he took his leave.

The day was young yet, and he had several hours before him ere keeping his appointment with the merchant.

He did not, however, seek his usual business routes. He had too much in prospect to care for jobs, and plenty to think of. It was going to be no easy matter to carry out the detective's plan, and the boy had to set his wits to work.

An hour afterward found him in a respectable but not aristocratic region on the east side of the city, well up town.

He was moving along in an indolent fashion, when he was accosted by a very sweet-toned woman's voice.

"Will you be kind enough to carry this basket for me?"

Frank turned. He saw before him a well-dressed young lady, in appearance not much older than himself, and very pretty. There was a winning smile on her face as she held toward him the not very heavy basket.

"Guess I will," answered Frank. "That's my line of business."

"I know that," she remarked, as she walked beside him. "I have seen you before, and noticed how active and energetic you are."

Frank turned and stared at her. The whole city seemed to have been suddenly taken with the fancy of noticing his activity and energy.

"I don't want no taffy," he said, in a tone of disgust.

The young lady seemed strongly inclined to conversation, despite the boy's insolent answer to her compliment.

She chatted on, keeping to the subject of himself and his business, until Frank got more than a dose of his own virtues.

He was about ready to drop the basket, and bid her do her own carrying, when she stopped before the door of a house with some pretensions.

She held out her hand for the basket.

"How much do I owe you?"

"A quarter, I reckon."

"A quarter? Isn't that rather high?"

"That's my price. Ten cents for the job, and the balance for the taffy you've been givin' me."

She laughed in a silvery tone as she handed him the money.

"I am not the only one who has noticed your industry," she said. "If you will take my advice you may learn of something to your advantage. There is a wealthy gentleman of my acquaintance who has taken a strong fancy to you. If you play your cards well you may be on the high road to fortune."

Frank stared at her in utter amazement. "Another," he said to himself. "When was this thing to come to an end?"

He was on the point of blurting out his opinion, but he checked his incautious tongue in time.

"I don't want nobody's fortune 'cept my own," he declared pointedly. "Got 'bout as many jobs now as one boy of my size can fill. I s'pose every Yankee boy kin be 'lected President, if he goes fur it; but I ain't going fur it—it's gittin' too common."

His new friend laughed in a very merry manner.

"You are an independent fellow," she declared. "And yet, fortune is not to be thrown away. I am in earnest."

"So am I," answered Frank.

"At any rate I want you to call on me to-morrow evening," she continued. "It will be to your advantage. You will remember this street and number?"

"You bet. But I won't make no promise."

"Very well. But I will expect you all the same," she answered, with a winning smile.

Frank walked away. He was a little touched at heart by the beauty and agreeableness of his new friend.

"Here's another plum for Detective Tim's pie," he muttered to himself. "It'll lift the top crust clean off if this thing keeps up."

CHAPTER III.

DOUBLING UP ON A SITUATION.

A MONTH has passed since the date of the events recorded in the previous chapters. We must look up Frank Hearty and see what this month has done for him.

His situation has certainly improved in that time. Our late street Arab is seated at a well-furnished breakfast-table in the dining-room of Mr. Bidding's fine mansion.

He is dressed in a fashionably-cut suit of dark cloth, which gives him a very gentlemanly aspect, and does much credit to his fine form and handsome face.

But a glance at his countenance shows that he is the same blunt and independent Frank Hearty of old.

Opposite him at the table sits Mr. Bidding, with a benevolent smile on his broad features.

"I hope you are fully satisfied now with your change of situation, my son," he says, in a tone of great kindness. "Is it not better to live in a splendid house, with good food and fine clothes, and with gentlemanly surroundings, than to herd with ragged street urchins, half-starved and half-clothed, and bred like pigs?"

"There's where you're kinder off yer eggs, Mr. Bidding," answered Frank, independently.

"The boys talk rough, I'll giv in to that, but rough honesty's better than smooth rascality."

"No doubt," laughed Mr. Bidding. "It is hard to wean you, Frank, from your first love."

"I won't go back on the boys, now you can bet your bottom dime on that," answered the free-spoken lad. "I ain't never goin' to let new clothes make a hog o' me."

"They don't dress hogs in broadcloth, in these days."

"Don't you be too sure o' that, Mr. Bidding. The biggest hogs I ever see'd walked on two legs, and wore gold watch chains and diamond rings."

Mr. Bidding laughed loudly.

"You are a shrewd one, Frank. You have learned some things, I see. I hope your school-life will add to them. How do you like your school by this time?"

"I don't quite take to it like I do to clam chowder. There's too much j'ography and arithmetics for my constitution. S'pose Hong Kong is a Chiny city, as the master says. I dunno what differ that's goin' to make to me, 'cept I tread on it and smash it."

"No, no, not a China city. A city in China, in the country of China, he means."

"That's down-town, ain't it? 'Mong the pig-tailers, in the laundry shops. Anyhow, he says 'dunno' ain't good English. I oughter say 'I do not know.' Catch me usin' four words when I kin plug it all out in one! Not much, hossfly!"

"Come, come, Frank, you must pay attention to the teacher. You use shockingly bad language. You must try and reform yourself, and speak like a gentleman."

"Dunno as it's in the wood."

"Yes it is. I have confidence in you, my son. You will do nothing to disgrace me before company."

"Reckon not. Got to disgrace myself first, and I don't build on that. But 'cordin' to my 'count 'tain't wrong words but it's wrong doin's as disgraces folks. Never done nothin' yit as I'm 'shamed on. Guess I'll pick up my books and toddle, Mr. Bidding. It's gettin' on to school time."

"You are a rough diamond, if ever there was one. But, we will take off your rough outer coat yet, and make you shine."

"You'll have to rub the skin off, then," rejoined Frank, as he rose from the table. "Much obliged to you fur what you've done, Mr. Bidding. But I'm 'feard you've took the wrong pig by the ears."

"I would not like to buy you at your own price, Frank."

"I'd go cheap, I know. But I reckon I'd be wuth all I'd bring, and that's more nor you could say for everybody."

After a few more remarks, Frank left the room.

Mr. Bidding remained at the table, lazily sipping his coffee.

"The sharp little rascal!" he muttered sourly to himself. "I've got no fool to deal with, that is evident. And no creature of putty, that I can shape as I please with my fingers. It will cost me something in money and more in temper to manage this wild colt. But the stake is worth the game. I wish he would only show some feeling of gratitude. I must get him into shape to handle, when the time comes, or all my labor will be thrown away. I certainly ought to be paid well to make up for the shocking grammar and pronunciation to which I have to listen."

He smiled knowingly as he continued to sip his coffee in a lazy fashion.

Meanwhile Frank was leaving the house, with a school-bag under his arm, that seemed to be full of books.

There was a knowing smile on his face also.

"Oh, don't he think he's got hold of a nice piece o' dried beef, 'most ready to chip!" he said to himself. "He on'y ought to come round to school some day, to see how I'm gettin' 'long in j'ography. 'S' if I didn't know the differ 'twixt crockeryware and the country where Ram Sam comes from! There's greener folks than your 'dopted son in this yere country, Mr. Bidding."

Ten minutes of brisk walking brought the active lad to a locality on the west side of the town, of a somewhat disreputable aspect.

Here he plunged through some narrow streets, and finally entered a tumble-down house, up whose stairs he strode to the third floor.

He opened a door on this floor in a familiar manner, and stepped into a small room, very sparsely furnished.

Its only occupant was a middle-aged woman, dressed in a greasy and ragged suit, and with an ill-favored though good-natured face.

"Good-mornin', Aunt Kitty," greeted the boy, cheerily. "Here's the books!" he laughed. "You kin take keer of 'em while I shift my fancy rig."

Frank plunged through an inner door into another room. He was not long gone. In five minutes he emerged, now dressed in a gray business suit.

Meanwhile the woman had emptied the bag, taking from it some papers, and several oranges and bananas.

"Them's what I didn't eat fur dinner. Reckon you'll enjoy 'em, aunty."

"You're a good boy, Franky. I allers said you was a good boy."

Frank laughed cheerily as he snatched up his papers and turned to the door.

"I'll be back 'bout six, or maybe afore," he said as he vanished down the stairs.

Whistling with the gayety of a mockingbird, he emerged into the street, and hurried across town, until he reached a street-car line.

Springing upon a car, he thrust his hand into his pocket with an air of immense satisfaction, and with a loud rattling of coins selected his fare.

"Ain't it jovial?" he said to himself gayly. "Never felt half so big in my life afore. Tell you what, it's spicy fun to run your own bank."

Reaching the business locality of the city, he sprung from the car and hurried to the establishment of Marsden & Co.

Entering this, he made his way back to the office, with winks and nods to several of the busy salesmen whose acquaintance he had made.

"Bless us, if you ain't got the softest snap of anybody I know of," exclaimed one of these. "Just showing yourself at half-past nine. It's a wonder the old man stands it."

"He's afeard I'd discharge him if he kicked up any capers," exclaimed Frank confidently. "I got a doctor's 'tificate that I've been brung up tender, and my narves mustn't be disturbed."

"I bet I'd disturb them with a rope's-end if I had charge of you," laughed the man. "Dunno how you'd do it 'cept you hung yer-self on the rope's end, and I had to cut you down," retorted Frank as he passed on.

A few steps more brought him into Mr. Marsden's office. That gentleman was seated at his desk writing.

He looked round at Frank with a suppressed sourness of aspect.

"Here at last! Have you noticed what time it is, Frank?"

"'Bout ten o'clock, ain't it?" answered Frank, looking innocently at the clock.

"No, it is not. But it is half-past nine."

"That's all 'cause I can't tell the time by the clock," rejoined the boy with a placid look. "Don't like to git here ahead o' time, but can't always hit it."

Mr. Marsden stared at the imperturbable boy, and then broke into a laugh:

"You are an incorrigible rascal, I fear. Did you get the papers signed?"

"Reckon so. Never miss what I go fur. When I'm told to fetch a thing, I fotch it. If I don't work long hours, I squeeze a good deal into them."

He laid the papers he had brought before Mr. Marsden.

"Very true, Frank. I will give you that credit. You have proved all that I was sure you would be. You are earnest, active, wide-awake, shrewd, and with first-class business judgment. I don't often make a mistake in a character."

"That's the reason you wanted me so bad, Mr. Marsden?"

"Just so. And if you continue as bright as you have proved yourself, I will make a man of you yet."

"I reckon I'd grown up into one if you'd never see'd me. Got the right stuff in me. I don't want to be imperdent, Mr. Marsden, but I don't like taffy. That's the solid fact, and there ain't no harm to say it."

Mr. Marsden laughed again, as if to conceal the expression that flashed across his face. He took up the papers which Frank had laid before him, and examined them.

"That is well, my boy. Now I wish you to take this letter to its address, and wait for an answer."

Frank quietly took the letter handed him, and read the address.

"S'pose Mr. Brown ain't in?"

"Then wait for him."

"S'pose he ain't goin' to be in?"

"Then find him."

"If it takes all day?"

"Yes. Don't return without an answer."

"All right, sir. Them's orders from headquarters. Don't like to make no move 'thout 'strutions. I'll fetch him, you kin bet high on that."

He slipped the letter into his pocket, and left the room.

Mr. Marsden followed him with a look of interest.

"It is no flattery to Frank Hearty to call him smart and wide-awake. I would be better satisfied if he was not quite so shrewd and business-like. But, my scheme is well laid, and cannot fail to work. That is, if I can prevent any suspicions on his part."

He turned to his desk again, quite ignorant of the fact that his *protege* had more than suspicion—that he was *sure* there was some underhand game at work.

While these thoughts passed through the merchant's astute brain, his young messenger proceeded on his errand.

He took a street car to go up-town to his destination. To his surprise and satisfaction, he found himself seated beside Detective Dodge.

A conversation ensued between them in a low tone, so as not to attract the attention of the other passengers.

Frank, in a few words, told the officer how he had worked his scheme of filling two positions at once.

"I belong to Mr. Bidding from six o'clock at night till eight in the mornin'," he remarked. "Then I go out to school, but it's a school of bizness I'm in, down in Mr. Marsden's 'stablishment. Works first rate so far, but I 'spect some time there'll be a 'splosion, when my 'dopted daddy calls on the schoolmaster to see how I'm gettin' 'long in j'ography. T'other one I ain't a bit 'feard of. Told him I was bound to have my time for sport."

"Very well done, Frank," said the detective, approvingly. "I don't fear that Bidding will trouble himself about your schooling. For my part I have learned nothing yet. So far as I have traced the history of these two men everything is straight."

"Ain't seen 'em yit, I s'pose."

"No. There is time enough for that."

"How 'bout the good-lookin' lady as I carried the basket fur? Got her down fince?"

"Not yet. I doubt if she is all she pretends to be. I have my scouts at work there, but they are still in the dark."

"Maybe I'd best stop and see her, 'cordin' to her invitation."

"Not till I give you the word. Make no move without my advice."

"All serene. I got that down fine."

The detective left the car at this point, and Frank pursued his journey alone.

We shall not follow him, but return to Mr. Marsden's office, where the young messenger was awaited somewhat impatiently for the remainder of the day.

He failed to put in an appearance, however. The next day came and passed without a sign of the tardy messenger.

On the morning of the third day he strolled in, with his usual free-and-easy air. Mr. Marsden looked up at him somewhat pettishly.

"Where in the world have you been?" he asked.

"Arter Brown."

"What? All this time?"

"Reckon so. Here's the answer."

"But—I do not understand—"

"I was to fotch him 'fore I come back. Them was the orders. So I fatched him. But I had a jolly run for it."

"Where? How?"

"Chased him all over town, and then had to race him clean up to Albany. Nailed him jist as he was starting for Chicago. Lucky I did, or I mought 'a' had to foller him clean round the world. I'd 'a' fatched him if he went to the moon. Had my 'strutions, and orders is orders."

Mr. Marsden looked up in silent amazement at his messenger. He was just beginning to learn the caliber of the lad he had taken into his service.

CHAPTER IV.

FRANK TAKES A HOLIDAY.

"You never played big-bug, Aunt Kitty, I s'pose?"

This question was asked by Frank Hearty, who had secretly entered the humble home of the woman he called by this name.

"I never had a chance," she replied, somewhat surlily.

"Well, I don't reckon you lost much. I'm jist sick and tired of it, and you bet I'm goin' to have a lark. Goin' to put on my no-count rig, and hunt up the boys."

"You'd better keep clear o' them boys. They won't bring you to no good."

Frank laughed and passed on into the private apartment which he seemed to use as his own.

In ten minutes afterward he emerged, dressed in the forlorn suit he had formerly worn.

"What do you think of that, Aunt Kitty? Ain't I a gay and lively coon? Jist begin to feel like myself ag'in."

He began to dance around the room, whistling and singing snatches of popular airs. As he passed the old lady he caught her round the waist and forced her to dance with him.

She released herself by giving Frank a lusty box on the ear.

"Take that, you young reprobate, and leave me alone."

"You don't think nothin' 'bout a feller's feelin's," said Frank, rubbing his ear with a very doleful aspect.

"Get out, now. I can get nothing done while you're about."

"See here, aunty," asked Frank, "what do you think's the reason them big-bugs took me in?"

"'Cause you're good-looking and sassy. Them things go a good ways."

"It's more nor that," declared Frank, shaking his head decisively. "I done my prettiest to make 'em kick me out, but it was all wasted. They wanted me too bad. What for?"

"How should I know?"

"You oughter know. I dunno much 'bout myself, and you know a jugful. These two men ain't no born fools. There's a mystery somewhere 'bout this chicken."

"Oh, get out!" said the woman, surlily. "I'm tired o' your gammon."

"Who am I, Aunt Kitty?" persisted Frank. "Who was my daddy and mammy? I've been livin' with you a'most since no time. What's the reason you won't never tell me nothin'?"

"Because I know nothing. You were a smart bunch of a brat when I got you. Picked you up half-started in the street. Who you was or where you came from nobody knowed. All I know is I've tuk care o' you since, and ain't got much thanks for it."

"Yes, you have, Aunt Kitty!" cried Frank. "I ain't no hog, nary time. You've hustled me about rough now and then, but I guess I 'arned it all. But you've guv me a home, and I won't fergit it."

"I don't b'lieve you will, Franky."

There was a show of affection in the look which she gave him.

"I reckon I'll git," he continued. "I'm on a lark to-day—goin' to play truant."

He shot whistling from the room, and went down the stairs with a hop, skip and jump.

Aunt Kitty stood in the doorway, looking after him with a strange expression upon her homely face.

"I do b'lieve I'm half in love with the boy," she murmured. "I'd like to tell him the whole story, but I daresen't. He's right in thinking there's a mystery. I don't know the half of it myself, and I got well paid for holding my tongue about that half. It won't do, Franky. I can't afford to cut off my bread and butter."

Meanwhile Frank had gained the street. His whistle stopped as he stepped on the pavement, and a look of more seriousness came upon his face.

"Ther' ain't no use in Aunt Kitty playin' it on me," he considered. "She can't fool this chicken. 'I ain't lived with her so long fur nothin'. She's a-bidin' somethin'. I wish I could only shake up my memory. I know it's got something in it 'bout old times; but I can't never git it into shape."

He shook his head doubtfully as he walked soberly along.

But this mood did not last long. Frank's irrepressible spirits came up again, and ere long he was hurrying onward, with a step between a walk and a dance, while scraps of song came from his jovial lips.

"Wonder where all the boys is? I'm in fur a lark. Lawsee, ain't it jolly to be your own boss, and not have to play gentleman, or go where you're told? Only for what Detective Tim said, I b'lieve I'd cut loose altogether, and let things slide."

He had cut loose for that day in earnest. Seeking his old haunts he hunted up his former associates, and it was not long ere they were at their accustomed sports and games, killing time and enjoying life with all the zest and freedom from care of your genuine gamins.

"I s'pose you know I've gone into biz, fellers. But to-day's my holiday, and I'm after a lark. Let's cut stick from work, and go in fur fun."

"Got any stamps, Frank?"

"What d'ye take me for? You bet I have."

"Then you're the boss. Jist say the word. We ain't the sort to go back on an angel."

While the light-hearted gamins, led by Frank, whose escape from duty had filled him with overflowing spirits, were laying their programme for a day of sport, other circumstances, of interest to our readers were taking place elsewhere.

Detective Dodge, though other business had prevented him from paying any close attention to that of his youthful client, had not quite neglected it.

He had managed to interview both Mr. Marsden and Mr. Bidding, on satisfactory pretexts, and was now seated in his office considering the results.

"There is many a smooth-flowing stream that

has big and ugly fish swimming beneath the surface," he remarked. "We can't see them, but that's no proof that they are not there. The only way to find them is to fish for them. And that's just what I am going to do. But the trouble in this kind of fishing is where to get the right bait for your hooks."

He drew away at his pipe for some minutes in silence. Then he resumed his soliloquy.

"I don't like that Marsden. There's something sneaking about him. Let me see what I've got jotted down."

Taking a note-book from his pocket, Detective Dodge turned over the leaves until he reached the desired page.

"Ten years in the indigo and spice trade. Showy business, but desperate hand at cutting prices. Big show on the surface, but shaky down below. Might easy get toppled over if there came a squeeze in the market."

"I shouldn't wonder if Marsden wanted money bad, and was now ready to play any ugly trick to get it. But how he expects to squeeze cash out of a ragged street boy is a mystery."

"Don't belong to New York. Came here from the West about twelve years ago. Where from? That don't show on the record. That's the first thing to find out."

He turned a few pages of his note book and consulted it again.

"I haven't quite made out Bidding. He is less transparent. A retired gentleman, living on his fortune, and with all the habits, tastes and ideas of a born aristocrat. But is that the man to take a street Arab into his home, adopt him as his son, and try to lick an untamed cub into gentlemanly shape?"

"I rather fancy not. Bidding must have a bigger stake in the game than the other. He has got more to swallow. An office boy and an adopted son are two very different things."

"There is the same mystery about this man as about the other. I haven't been able to track him. He hasn't spent all his life in New York. That's as far as I've got on his trail yet."

The note book came again into service.

"Clare Lacy," he read. "She has a taking name at any rate. Lives at home, with her widowed father, in a very quiet and respectable way. No sign of anything crooked."

"What was her game? It's my notion she's the deepest one of the whole set. Jake Joseph's no baby at his business, yet this young lady has euchered him completely. I fancy I shall have to take her case in hand myself."

A step at the door interrupted his soliloquy. He closed the book and waited.

The door opened and a thin-faced personage entered. He was very plainly dressed, and there was nothing about him to attract attention. He was one of that uninteresting kind that might have been passed a hundred times on the street without notice.

"Hey, Jake, it is you, is it? I was just thinking about you. How about that woman? Any coals on the fire yet?"

"Yes," answered Jake, quietly seating himself.

"Shown up at last, eh? What is it?"

"A masculine. Eight o'clock last night."

"At house?"

"No."

"Where then?"

"In Park."

"Well? Go on with your story."

"Dropped her. Took him up. Led me a dance." Jake was evidently a man of few words.

"Was it a long interview?"

"Half hour."

"Hear anything?"

"No. Chap all eyes."

"Describe him."

"Tall. Stout. Black coat. Gray pants. Soft hat. Diamond on third finger, left. Same in shirt stud. Full face. Knobby nose. Mustache. Didn't get near enough to take him all in."

"Well? Where did you track him to?"

Jake scratched his head confusedly. He was not so prompt to answer as before.

"Ah!" cried the detective. "Dished?"

"An awfully wide-awake one," answered Jake. "Flung me crooked. Fifth Avenue Hotel. Too many doors to that hotel. Two eyes can't see all creation at once."

"Eh, Jacob, so you've been flung by a jolly, sharp con, and don't like to own up. Bad, bad, my boy."

"Good," returned Jake.

"How do you make it?"

"Shows we're on a true trail. Nobody but a mighty old bird could have flung me. These ain't honest folks we're after."

"And you have taken a whole month to find that out? And I knew it before you began. I am afraid you are losing your grip, Jacob."

"I'll have him yet," answered Jake, setting his lower lip firm, while his eyes dropped in a crestfallen way.

"You know how to redeem your reputation," retorted the detective, coldly.

He took up his pen and began to write, without further heed to Jake.

The latter took his hat and walked irresolutely to the door.

"Going," he said.

"Good-by," without looking up from the paper.

"I'll fetch him," declared Jake, savagely, as he strode with an angry step from the room.

Detective Dodge looked after him with a grim smile.

"I have got him on his mettle now," he remarked. "If Jake fails in this job then there is nothing safe in Sodom."

He continued to write.

An hour or two passed, during which the detective was several times interrupted by the entrance of persons bearing messages.

He seemed to have a dozen irons in the fire, and to have a squad of men employed in his several schemes.

At the end of that period the mail was brought in.

He ran over the letters handed him with the same rapidity and ability for dispatching business which he had before shown.

Each of them as read was consigned either to the waste-basket, or to a letter-file, notes, more or less copious, being made of several of them.

The last letter he took up brought an exclamation from his lips.

He tore it open hastily and ran his eye over its contents so rapidly that he seemed to take them in at a glance.

A smile of satisfaction came upon his face.

"Run down, so far," he muttered. "I've got Marsden traced to Leadville. That's a good step forward in the game. But he was only a prospector in those diggings. I must follow him further back."

"Leadville is the end of a line of which I must find the beginning. As for Bidding, nothing appears. He either figured under another name, or Leadville is not one of his haunts. Yet the life-lines of these two men touch somewhere, that I am sure of."

"If I follow Marsden far enough I will find Bidding crossing the same track. And where they cross that is my working-point."

"If Jake now only runs down this man, I will have a third string to my bow. I must and will get to the bottom of the mystery that surrounds this boy. I am satisfied that I am not working for nothing. There is money enough somewhere behind it to pay me well for my labor."

He rose, placed the letter on file, and took his hat.

"No man can change his face as easy as he can his name," he remarked. "If there is a photograph of this man Bidding in existence, I must have it."

He walked with a resolute step from the room.

CHAPTER V.

FRANK'S LARK AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

It was growing late in the afternoon. The day was rather a chilly one, and a group of boys, who had gathered on a North River wharf, were making various efforts to keep themselves warm.

Among these Frank Hearty and another lad were amusing themselves at ball play, flinging and catching very skillfully.

Ere this game had gone on very long, another youth, of Frank's size, and full of the spirit of mischief, began meddling with their play.

He had a base-ball bat, with which he kept striking at the ball as it flew through the air, heedless of remonstrances.

"Now you better drop that fun, or there'll be trouble," cried Frank at length, in growing anger.

"What'll happen?" demanded the mischievous boy.

"Oh, nothin', I reckon. But if you keep on tryin' you'll hit that ball, and if you do—"

"What'll you do?"

"Likely 'nough you'll find out," answered Frank shortly, as he sent the ball whizzing through the air.

The imp of mischief made another effort to strike it, and very nearly with success.

"It'll be fun if I knock it into the dock," he said teasingly.

"I reckon it will," answered Frank, "for you'll go inter the dock arter it."

"Me? Who's to put me there?"

"This chicken."

"Tain't in your boots, Frank Hearty."

"Maybe it's in my gloves, then. Jist you flep it into the water, and I bet you'll see little fishes."

A laugh of disdain came from the other boy, and he made more active efforts than ever to hit the flying ball, as if in defiance.

At last he succeeded.

His bat struck the passing ball, and sent it whizzing high into the air. It fell on the wharf log. From here it bounded and dropped into the water of the dock.

The remaining boys had ceased their sports on hearing this controversy, and were waiting in hopes of some more lively amusement.

It was not long in coming.

The ball had hardly touched the water ere Frank was on his antagonist.

The latter made a sweep at him with the bat, but in an instant it was torn from his hands and Frank had grappled with him.

It seemed at first sight an even game. The two boys were very much of a size, and looked as if they might be a close match.

But Frank quickly showed that he had tougher muscles and more vim. Step by step he dragged his antagonist across the pier, till they stood struggling on the wharf log, with the darkling water ten feet below them.

"You ain't goin' to fling him in, Frank?" protested one of the other boys. "The water's mighty cold."

"That ain't my fault. He knocked the ball in, and he can go in arter it."

The other lad had set his teeth in silence, and struggled violently.

For the moment, as they swayed back and forth on the narrow wharf log, it looked as if they might both go in together.

But Frank meant business. He had long been a leader among the gamins, and he was not going to brook a rival.

He was older, more wiry and more energetic than his antagonist, which gave him a decided advantage.

A desperate surge, a sway back and forth, and then Frank tore himself forcibly from the grip of the other boy, and gave him a vigorous send outward.

The unlucky lad toppled over, and, with a yell of anger and dread, went downward.

A loud splash followed as he struck the water below.

A shout of laughter and excitement rose from the gamins as they rushed to the edge and looked over, full of wild enjoyment of the situation.

The unlucky fellow had risen from his plunge several feet from the wharf, and was doing more splashing than swimming.

Frank did not trouble himself about him. He did not even look over to see what had become of him, but stood with folded arms and a red spot in his cheek.

"That was a cruel action. I did not expect it of you," spoke a soft voice at his elbow, in accents of reproach.

He turned hastily. There stood the young lady whose basket he had carried a month before.

"You don't s'pose it'll hurt him?" said Frank in apology. "It mought wash some o' the dirt off his hide, but he wouldn't be no worse for that."

"He might be drowned. The water there is deep."

"Him be drowned! You could drown a water-rat easier."

"Why did you do it?" she persisted.

"'Cause he knocked my ball over. Told him I'd guv him a souse if he did, and I allus keeps my word."

"It was cruel," she declared. "The water is very cold, and he might catch his death— And look, I do believe he is drowning!"

A gurgling cry had at that moment come from the boy in the water.

Frank turned and looked down. There seemed a strange feebleness about the boy's movements.

"Hullo, Joe!" he cried. "Anything wrong?"

"Yes," came the answer, in feeble tones. "Help me! I'm guv out!"

"Hold on, lively!" yelled Frank, in sudden excitement. "I'm a-comin'! I'll yank you out!"

Tearing off his coat and hat the impulsive boy sprang to the wharf-log, and with a hasty plunge dived headforemost downward.

Under the water he went, a few feet from the struggling victim.

The latter seemed on the point of sinking when Frank emerged again, just behind him, and caught him round the waist.

"Hold your level, Joe," he cried, cheerily. "We'll have you out o' trouble in a jiffy. Dunno what ails you that ye're tryin' to git yer-self drowned. Thought you had more grit. See here, you ain't skeered, are you?"

"No," answered Joe. "Reckon I hit my head on somethin' when I went down."

"Then put your hand on my shoulder, and mind yer eye as you don't kick up no botheration. If you've got the sense of a cat, I'll fotch you out. Kin you do it?"

"Reckon so," answered Joe, as he obeyed directions.

These operations were observed with much interest from above, the young lady standing eagerly on the edge of the wharf, and excitedly calling down to the swimmers.

In a minute or two they saw Frank swimming easily inward, bearing his rescued victim, who remained perfectly quiet as he rested a hand on the shoulder of the swimmer.

"Toss down the end o' that rope," cried Frank, on reaching the side of the wharf.

Some of the boys above did so. Frank, holding on to a spike with one hand, managed to fasten the rope round Joe's body with the other.

"Now haul away."

The boys above obeyed with a vim that quickly landed the rescued lad on the wharf.

Frank, for his part, did not wait to be lifted, but clambered up the slimy logs with the agility of a cat, by the aid of spikes and projections, and reached the surface at about the same time with Joe.

"Guess that's gay and happy," he cried cheerily. "Bet none o' you boys won't knock my ball overboard ag'in, when I tell you to let up. 'Cause when I say biz, I mean biz."

"I won't," answered Joe, feebly. "You're a mighty prime feller, Frank, if you did toss me over."

"He is a regular little hero!" exclaimed the young lady enthusiastically. "He ought to have a medal from the Humane Society."

"What fur?" asked Frank. "Don't you be a-pilin' it on me that way. It was me as soused him, an' you don't s'pose I was goin' to stand by and see him drowned? I would be a sweet sucker to do that."

The lady looked at him with mingled surprise and amusement. Then a new thought came to her mind.

"You will both catch your deaths," she exclaimed. "Standing there in your wet clothes in this chilly air! Come with me to my house. It is not far off. You must dry yourselves by the fire."

The boys were cold enough not to object to this impulsive invitation, and they followed the enthusiastic young lady.

But Frank ordered back the rest of the gang. "Reckon she don't want all of you ragged coves a-taggin' arter her," he declared.

The late antagonists, now seemingly the best of friends, and dripping with the water with which they were soaked to the skin, followed their fair leader at a short distance.

The people whom they passed looked back at them. The combination was a rather odd one.

As they approached their destination the young lady turned back.

"Do you boys like candy?"

"I do," cried Joe, eagerly.

"I don't keer overly much fur it," declared Frank.

"Very well. The boy that wants it can have it. Go to that store on the corner and get what you want," she said, handing Joe a coin. "We will walk on slowly and you can overtake us."

Joe ardently accepted this suggestion. He dearly loved sweetmeats, and he plunged in his dripping state into the store, leaving his benefactress and his companion to proceed alone.

They reached the house to which Frank had once before accompanied her. She opened the door.

"Do you go back to the kitchen fire," she suggested. "I will wait here for your comrade."

Frank was chilled through, and he lost no time in obeying orders.

He found a warm fire in the kitchen range, and seated himself close before it, till the steam went up in a cloud from his clothes.

"Jolly papers!" he ejaculated after a time.

"But Joe's a long while a-comin'."

It was ten minutes, in fact, before his hostess reappeared.

"I do not know what has become of the boy," she declared. "There is no sign of him. Is he so fond of candy as to run away with it, so as not to have to share it?"

"I wouldn't trust him," answered Frank. "He's a sort o' sneak. Don't b'lieve I'd jumped in arter him if I hadn't knocked him in."

"Yes, you would," she rejoined pleasantly. "You are a nobler lad than you give yourself credit for. Why did you not come and see me that time, as you promised?"

"Didn't never promise," declared Frank. "And didn't have nothin' to see you fur. Weren't a mite o' use in it."

"I gave you something to see me for," she rejoined. "I told you that there was a rich gentleman who was inclined to do something to your advantage."

"Didn't want nothin' done to my 'vantage. Reckon I'm 'bout as happy as they often git 'em up, and what's the use botherin'?"

"Mercy on the boy! You don't want to be a beggar and a vagrant all your life?"

"I don't never calculate to be either. I've allers 'arnt my grub, and allers 'spect to."

"But, my dear boy, you might be rich without labor, wear good clothes, have plenty of money, get an education, and become a gentleman, all for the asking."

"That's all gammon!" declared Frank decidedly. "Them sort o' angels don't fly nowadays. I reckon I'd best git. I'm 'bout dry 'nough now."

"Well, you are a queer one!" she said, as she rose with a laugh. "If you are so set in your notions, that ends it, and I have nothing more to say."

She led the way from the room, a little angrily as Frank thought. But he quietly followed, satisfied that he had done what the detective would have advised.

The way to the front door seemed a long one, and not the one by which Frank had come. At length his conductor stopped before a door at the end of a long hall. She turned back to the boy:

"Then you are bent on going?"

"Reckon so. If you don't mind."

"Oh, I have no objections. You can go."

She pressed heavily with her foot as she spoke. Instantly there was a crackling sound, and a portion of the floor seemed to give way beneath him.

Ere the trapped boy could dream what was in the wind, he found himself falling, down, down into silence and darkness, while the opened floor closed with a snap above his head.

CHAPTER VI.

DETECTIVE DODGE AT WORK.

AT ten o'clock that night, a telephonic message passed over the wire to a locality in the northwestern part of the city.

It was couched in the following strange words:

"The goose is plucked and in the pen. Send at once. There are other birds on the wing, and the hunters must be wary."

What it meant seemed clear to somebody. For at midnight a close carriage stopped before the door of the house in which Frank had been trapped, a heavy bundle was carried out and placed in this vehicle, and it then drove rapidly away.

It was followed for some distance by a lurking figure that sprung up from a covert on the opposite side of the street.

The person ran rapidly after the carriage, and caught up to it after a hot chase.

He grasped it firmly in the rear. But at that instant the coachman laid the whip to the horses, they bounded forward, and the carriage was swung over a stone that lay in the way of the wheels.

As a result the grasp of the pursuer was torn loose, and he was flung heavily to the ground, while the vehicle dashed furiously on.

For five minutes the man lay prostrate upon the stony surface of the street, unnoticed at that late hour of the night.

Then he moved, and after a minute more rose slowly to his feet, staggering in a dazed fashion.

He had been knocked senseless by his fall.

Meanwhile the carriage had long vanished, every trace of life about the house had disappeared, and what had passed seemed known only to the stars, whose blinking eyes looked knowingly down.

"I may as well go home," muttered the man. "Othello's occupation's gone—for this night, at least."

He, too, vanished from sight, and the place returned to its ordinary midnight silence and loneliness.

Three days after this scene Detective Dodge

had a visitor at his office, whom he received with unusual ceremony.

"Mr. Bidding," he remarked. "I am glad to see you. To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

"I did not imagine I was known to you," replied the visitor, as he stiffly took the chair offered him.

"It is our business to know everybody—that is by face and name. I cannot say that I know you in the full detective sense. I do not know where you were born, where you have lived, or what crimes you have committed."

He laughed as if he thought this a very jocular remark.

But Mr. Bidding did not seem to quite relish it. His face slightly changed color, and he put on a haughty air.

"I am here to engage you professionally," he remarked, stiffly.

"Ah! I see!" and the detective instantly assumed a grave business air. "Proceed, Mr. Bidding; let me hear your case."

He drew paper toward him, dipped his pen in the ink, and was ready to note down the heads of the conversation.

"A young man, who resides in my house, and whom I am about to adopt as my son, has disappeared for the past three days. I have waited patiently for his return, as he is of a somewhat truant disposition. But his long absence has alarmed me; I fear he has met with some accident, and I wish to engage you professionally to institute a search for him."

A slight change had come over the detective's countenance at the opening of these remarks. But it instantly passed away, and he listened with quiet attention.

"It is no uncommon case," he remarked, gravely. "This city is full of traps for the unwary. Can you describe this boy, his haunts, associates, habits, mode of life?"

Mr. Bidding showed some slight trace of confusion.

"He lived with me," he remarked, and had the dress, though perhaps not quite the address of a gentleman. He has, I confess, been brought up in rather a rough fashion.—But he comes of good stock," added the speaker, as if to satisfy his aristocratic conscience.

"Ah! I see. This boy is the son of some one you know."

"That is not of any consequence," returned Mr. Bidding, rather hastily. "I adopt him simply because it is my pleasure to do so."

He proceeded to describe the missing youth in a fashion that would have misled the detective if he had not been well informed in advance.

The aristocratic gentleman was ashamed to acknowledge that he had taken an untrained son of the street under his wing.

Detective Dodge heard him to the end, gravely putting in a question here and there, generally leading ones.

"I shall at once institute a search for this lad, Mr. Bidding," he said, after noting down the description. "If anybody can find him, I can. But the number of persons who disappear and are never found, is something frightful. Is any one else likely to be interested in his recovery?"

"No; he is an orphan, without friends and connections. His father—I know nothing about his father," he quickly corrected himself. "I leave the case in your hands, Mr. Dodge."

"I shall do my best with it," replied the detective gravely, as he bowed his visitor to the door.

But the portal had no sooner closed behind him than the whole manner of the detective changed.

"I have won a point in the game," he cried, cheerily. "My fine gentleman has let out more than he fancies. He is playing some deep scheme, or I know nothing about human nature. And I will probe that scheme to the bottom yet."

"But this disappearance of the boy is something curious. That I must decidedly look into. I like the young dog too well to let him go astray."

He was interrupted by the entrance of another person to his office. The detective had to suppress an exclamation of surprise when he looked upon this person. It was Mr. Marsden.

"Detective Dodge, I believe," remarked the merchant, in a business-like tone.

"That is my name and profession."

"My name is Marsden—of the firm of Marsden & Co. I have been directed to you as a skillful officer."

"What is your case, Mr. Marsden?" asked the detective, taking a chair, and motioning his visitor to another.

"A mysterious disappearance," replied the merchant. "A young man, who is employed in my office, in a position of confidence, has strangely vanished."

"How much cash has vanished with him?" asked the officer quietly.

"No, no, it isn't a case of that sort. He is honest. At any rate, he does not handle any money."

"Then you fear some accident?"

"Or some foul play. He has been gone for three days. I have had him sought for in his old haunts and among his former associates. I have no time to continue the search, and must engage you."

"Describe this missing boy," demanded the detective, preparing to take notes as gravely as if he did not already know all about it. "What were his haunts, and who were his associates? It is necessary that I should know all about him?"

Mr. Marsden proceeded, with none of the hesitation of Mr. Bidding, to describe Frank Hearty. The portrait he drew could scarcely have been recognized as the same with that drawn from the former visitor.

"I am somewhat surprised that you should have taken a vagrant and uneducated street boy into your service, and into a position of confidence, Mr. Marsden."

"The boy is not a common one. He is smart and diligent. He is too useful to me to let him go without a close search."

"But who is he? What are his antecedents? You must know something more about him."

"He has no antecedents—except dirt and poverty. His history is all in the future," rejoined the merchant.

Evidently he was not to be caught by leading questions as easily as Mr. Bidding.

"The case is before you," he remarked.

"I will take it," replied the detective. "If the boy is to be found I will find him. There are some other things I should like to know, Mr. Marsden."

"Very well. I am prepared to answer."

Detective Dodge proceeded to put a series of skillfully devised questions, gradually passing from the subject of the boy to that of the merchant himself.

"You must have brought up a good many young men into business habits, Mr. Marsden. I presume you have been a long time in business?"

"Only ten years in my present line."

"But you are an old New Yorker?"

"I cannot even acknowledge that. I have knocked about the world considerably. I spent years in the West, in the early mining days, and have tried more trades than one."

"In the West?" exclaimed the detective, with a great show of interest. "Why, I was there myself. We may have met before. Where were you located, sir?"

"Oh, all around!" he vaguely replied. "I hardly think we have met. I do not forget faces easily. But I must be going. I leave Frank's case in your hands."

"I shall do my best, sir."

He quietly opened the door for his departing visitor. He continued for a moment to gaze after him.

"Mr. Marsden doesn't pump easily," he remarked. "But I fancy there are some tender spots in his mining experience, by the way in which he flew the track."

"It is rather a curious experience that both these men should have applied to me for the same purpose. I ought to be able to make some valuable use of my opportunity."

"But first, what has become of that young rogue? Has really anything happened to him, or is he only playing truant from duty? I must investigate this."

Taking his hat the detective left the room.

His first visit was to the residence of Frank's Aunt Kitty.

He found this lady in a state of anxiety. Frank had never absented himself so long before. She told the officer the story of his resuming his old clothes, and going out for a lark with the boys.

But he had another object in view in this visit. He questioned the old lady closely and shrewdly in regard to Frank's early history, and her connection with him.

But the information obtained was very meager. All the satisfaction he got was to clearly perceive that she was concealing something.

He shook his head as he regained the street.

"She knows much more than she will tell," he remarked. "She has not brought up the boy through sheer benevolence. There is something back of this, which I must find out."

His next purpose was to question Frank's old street associates, "the boys" whom the truant had gone to seek.

The detective was not long in finding some of them, and in learning the story of their day's sport, ending with the wharf episode, and the departure of the pair of water-soaked champions under the lead of the young lady.

His interest increased at this. The description tallied with that of Clare Lacy, the lady whom he had already placed under shadow.

The next point was to find the boy, Joe. This was readily accomplished. A few questions brought out from Joe his share of the story.

He told how he had been sent to the confectioner's store for candy.

"I wasn't there very long," he declared. "But when I came out they was gone. I follered 'em up but couldn't git an eye on 'em. Didn't keer much neither, 'slong's I had the candy."

The affair was growing clearer. Frank had been separated from his associates, and lured to the house which he had been warned to avoid.

"What has Jake Price been doing? I have had no report from him."

He proceeded to seek his agent, and questioned him closely. There was a certain confusion and hesitation about Jake that interested the detective.

"You did not see the boy enter the house?"

"I was not here at that hour."

"Very well. He is concealed somewhere in that mansion—held as a prisoner, or worse. A search must be made."

Jake shook his head, while his face grew very red.

"He is not there now," he remarked.

"Why not?"

With some hesitation the discomfited spy told the story of the carriage, and of his having been left stunned in the street.

"Why did you not tell me of this before?"

"I was ashamed of my failure."

"You were a fool. But the boy has been removed. That is evident. Where? That is the next thing to find out."

CHAPTER VII.

THE RUBBING OF ALADDIN'S LAMP.

At the point at which we left it in the last chapter, the trail of the missing boy ended. The efforts to discover him were kept up with unabated diligence, but in vain. He had vanished so utterly that he seemed to have dropped out of existence.

It was not a matter of days only, but of months. For over three months the search was kept up with all the resources of the police department. Other cities were telegraphed to, every possible method of search was adopted, all bodies round drowned were examined, but equally in vain.

A quarter of a year had gone by and not the slightest trace of the missing Frank had been found.

The two gentlemen who had engaged the detective, Messrs. Bidding and Marsden, seemed very deeply concerned at the failure to discover him, and freely offered money to make any investigation that promised success.

Detective Dodge did not need their encouragement. He was himself deeply exercised by the loss of his *protege*, and bent on making every effort for his recovery.

But he did not forget the other mystery that lay behind all this. The anxiety evinced by these two gentlemen about a missing street Arab only added to his suspicion of their motive, and made him more alert to investigate their life record.

As for the woman in it, Clare Lacy, she was, apparently, left undisturbed. The astute Dodge recognized the fact that she formed the only link between him and his object, and any scare to her might break that link.

He was very well satisfied that a search of her house would be useless. It had been used as a trap for the unwary lad, but the carriage incident convinced him that the prisoner had been removed, and that a search would be worse than useless.

It would put her on her guard, which was what he particularly desired to avoid.

Let her alone and some communication between her and her employer must take place. The house was kept under watch night and day. She did not make a movement without being followed. Every device of the police was brought into play.

Yet not the least sign appeared to show that she had any secrets, or any interests beyond

those of every-day life. She shopped and marketed, but she made no visits and received no company.

"It's unnatural," said Jake, on one day making a report to the detective.

"What is unnatural?"

"She's a-playin' in it too deep, that's what. She's a mile and a half too innocent."

"Explain yourself, Jake."

"Tain't natural that a good-lookin' young 'oman like that shouldn't know nobody. She's a cuttin' that cake too thin."

"That's a fact, Jake. She certainly should know somebody, and have some visitors."

"There's other ways o' talking nowadays, except by word of mouth," continued Jake, with a knowing wink.

"Eh! What's that, Jake? You've smelt a rat?"

"Telephone," rejoined Jake, briefly.

"Aha! is that the dodge?"

"She's been telephonin'."

"What?"

"Can't say. Them there telephones is awkward things. There ain't no written message, like the telegraph. It's all wind, after it's once spoken. And when wind's lost its shape, there ain't nobody can put it together again."

"Very true," said the detective, laughing. "But it can be caught before it has lost its shape. People talk out loud in the telephone. And they've got to talk from one station to another."

"She talked to a public station that anybody can have for hiring."

"She may try it again, Jake."

"If she does, she's nabbed. She goes to a drug store, where she's been more than once before. I've bought them over. If she tries it again there'll be sharp ears about."

A week afterward Jake brought in another report.

"That young 'oman's been talkin' through the telephone again."

"Have you got the message?"

"It's got more knots than smooth places in it. It's one of the innocent kind again; but it argues suspicion."

"What is it?"

"She only says: 'Don't expect me. Will send particulars by letter.' Then she got an answer. She replied 'no,' and dropped the conversation."

"Have you traced her correspondent?"

"She called a far up-town station, Liberty Hall. I've been there and found the sort o' chap that had the other end of the wire when she was talking. It is the same chap she met in the Park, or some one very like him."

"This is important, Jake. It gives us a locality, at any rate. You had better go on duty at that district. The chap we want must live somewhere about there. Keep an eye open for him. I will see that the Lacy house is attended to."

Jake lost no time in obeying this useful advice. And this was the point which the investigation had reached after three long months of search. It was very little for the time, money and labor expended.

Meanwhile the detective was not idle in the other particulars of his search. His relations with Mr. Bidding had enabled him to obtain, unknown to that individual, the photograph he desired.

This had been sent west with instructions. In due time an answer was returned.

"The man of the photograph was in Virginia City in 1867. The face well known to some old miners. Name Birdwell. Struck pay dirt and made a stake."

He instantly wrote back.

"Track this man up. Spare no pains or money. Also Julius Marsden. If you can find their paths to cross anywhere, that's the point I want probed to the quick. You will understand."

But we must leave these side issues, and cast our eyes on the other side of the picture. Leaving Detective Dodge to slowly follow the tangled thread that led to his desired goal we must seek the missing boy, and trace his adventures from that fatal moment in which the floor gave way beneath his heedless feet.

He fell, as we have said, into silence and darkness, and the floor closed over his head with a snapping sound.

What had really happened was the opening of a trap door, worked by a spring on which his treacherous guide had stepped.

Removing her foot on the instant, the trap shot back to its place, and there was nothing to show that there was anything unusual about the floor.

But the victim had vanished. The fair traitress stood alone.

"Neatly done," she said, in a tone of satisfaction. "The trap has played its part. It must be removed at once, before a search can take place. And now to deal with my prisoner."

She walked quickly away, with the step of one whose plans were fully laid.

Meantime, in the vault beneath the floor, the captive lay half-stunned. He had dropped about ten feet, to the hard floor of a cellar, which he struck with such a thud as to knock all the breath out of his body.

Several minutes passed ere he was able to rise and crawl through the pitch-dark underground region, of whose character he could form no opinion.

A few steps brought him to a board partition. Feeling along this he reached a door, but it was firmly locked.

Turning back, he investigated the remaining walls of his dungeon. He soon found that he was in a close, musty apartment, less than ten feet square, apparently walled off from the remainder of the cellar. Then he realized how thoroughly he had been trapped. But he had very little time in which to indulge in reflection.

For a choking vapor of some kind seemed to be making its way through the narrow dungeon.

He gasped for breath and staggered through the smothering air. His head reeled, and he felt his senses leaving him.

Finally he fell like a dead weight to the floor, so heavily that his head struck the stone wall and was cut open in an ugly gash.

That was the end of Frank for the time being. How long he lay there or what happened to him he was in utter ignorance.

The heavy weight which two men bore from the house and deposited in a carriage at midnight was so thickly enveloped that these men failed to discover that it was a human form they bore.

When Frank awoke from his long insensibility, and slowly regained his vanished senses, he was utterly unaware of what time had elapsed or of what events had taken place.

It seemed to him that but a few minutes had passed by. He knew only that his head was very sore, and he dimly remembered having struck his scalp against the wall.

He put up his hand, expecting to find an open and bleeding wound.

Instead of that he discovered that his hair had been cut away, and that the throbbing place was covered with a close dressing of adhesive plaster.

By this time his wits had well returned, and he recognized the fact that daylight had replaced the thick darkness which he last remembered.

He looked around him with a curiosity that quickly changed to surprise and admiration.

Had he rubbed Aladdin's lamp, and been suddenly transported from squalor to splendor, he could not have been more astounded.

The apartment in which he lay was large, and elegantly furnished, with a richness and beauty of decoration which far surpassed those of Mr. Bidding's mansion.

The floor seemed carpeted with glowing roses. The bedstead was of some rich Oriental wood, and the bed coverings of a soft pink hue, and a lace-like fineness of surface. Easy chairs and footstools in crimson, painted ceiling and richly papered walls, pictures and articles of ornament—all gave the room an aspect of wealth and splendor which quite amazed its young inmate.

No less a transformation had taken place in himself. He was dressed in garments of the finest texture, a pair of embroidered slippers covered his feet, a Turkish smoking-cap was on the table beside him; in place of a coat he wore a richly embroidered dressing-gown that seemed worthy of a prince.

Half beside himself with surprise, Frank sprang up from the easy-chair in which he reclined, and ran to the nearest door of the apartment.

It opened at his touch, and admitted him to a beautifully arranged bath-room, with the most luxurious appointments. A door from this admitted him to a small but handsome dressing-room.

Keeping on, he next passed through library and dining-room, all adorned in the same lavish manner. There seemed no check to his progress. He opened still another door.

To his surprise and disappointment, he was back in the bedroom from which he had started. He had made his appointed round.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE REALM OF ENCHANTMENT.

THE young captive again made the round which we have described in the last chapter. He looked anxiously for a chance to extend his journey, but there was no door visible except those between the rooms.

And the place seemed absolutely destitute of windows. Yet there was plenty of light. Where did this light come from?

A single glance revealed the fact—the rooms were lit by skylights.

They were evidently at the top of the house, and must have been prepared for a special purpose.

The skylights stood partly open for ventilation, and were movable by the aid of silken cords.

But they were ten feet above his head, and there was no object about the rooms by whose aid they could be reached.

Frank stared in stupefied wonder. He then began to go round and round the circle of rooms, with a sort of terror, like one who has been lost in a forest.

Finally he found himself running at full speed as from some nameless dread. The gas which he had inhaled seemed to have affected his brain.

Suddenly he checked his speed and broke into a wild laugh.

"Didn't know I was sich a fool," he ejaculated.

"Mought think there was a tiger arter me. Dunno what it is skeers me. I oughter think myself in clevver to git into this sort o' headquarters."

He looked with deep admiration on the splendid adornments of his prison. But an expression of uneasiness quickly followed upon his face.

"It's a nice cage, but it's nothin' but a cage," he declared. "A cage that's had the sky fur a bed cover and all creation fur a pillow ain't the sort fur this kind o' thing. I'd sooner have a slice of out o' doors than the whole o' these circumflexions."

The uneasy captive flung himself into a chair and reflected. There was no door leading out of the rooms. Yet he had been brought into them.

How? Through the skylight? He looked at that and shook his head. There must be a secret door somewhere. It was impossible that these rooms had been made without a way in and out.

Frank sprang up and commenced a search for the supposed secret door. He now made the round of the rooms very carefully, examining the walls, lifting all curtains and hangings, studying the formation of the mantles and alcoves.

But everything seemed sound and immovable. The only visible communication with the outside world was in the heat registers, which had been provided to warm the rooms in winter.

"I never see'd sich a ridik'ous piece of business," he cried, stamping his foot with anger. "There ain't a shadder of a door nowhere. How the blazes they got me inter this hole gits me."

He began to think that it must be a sort of enchanted palace, like those of the Arabian Nights, that could only be opened by the touch of a magical wand, or some such out-of-the-way arrangement.

Frank laughed at the conceit. He was regaining some share of good-humor. One thing pleased him. In the sitting-room was a well-filled bookcase, and some newspapers and pamphlets were strewn over the table.

"It's lucky I know how to read," he said. "That's one pint where I've got an eddication. It'd be mighty lonely livin' in this sort o' palace with nothin' to do 'cept to study the figgers on the wall-paper."

He took up a newspaper, threw himself back in an easy-chair, and began to read.

For an hour he continued to amuse himself between his thoughts and the contents of the paper. Finally he threw it quickly down and sprang hastily to his feet.

"What's that?" he ejaculated.

He listened intently, but all was deathly still. Yet he was sure that he had heard a slight creaking noise.

"S'pose maybe it's somethin' in the street," he ejaculated. "Reckon not, though. The street noises don't seem ter git in here."

He had had enough of reading, and started to walk again through the rooms. There was one feeling that affected Frank. He was beginning to feel a touch of hunger, and thinking that something to eat wouldn't be out of the way.

He opened the door leading to his tastily-furnished dining-room. But he went no further. He stopped in utter astonishment.

For the table, which when he had last seen it was empty and covered with a red cloth, was now covered with white, and furnished with a

tempting array of dishes, from which arose a very appetizing odor.

"Well, I hope I may be shot if there ain't my dinner a-waitin' me!" ejaculated the astounded boy. "I'll guv up guessin' how it come there. There's magic 'bout this place, that's sure. But you bet I'm jist the chap as can put it down. Didn't know I was so empty till I smelt them vittals."

The meal proved to be well cooked and highly appetizing, and would have been as great a marvel as all the rest to Frank only for his late experience at Mr. Bidding's well-served table.

It was very certain that he was in condition to do justice to it. The smell and sight of the food made him doubly hungry, and without a thought of possible poisons concealed in the solids or sleeping draughts in the liquids, he made the most of his opportunity.

"Jolly, but that beefsteak is tender!" he exclaimed. "It's a mighty different stuff from the sole-leather grub they sell in restaurants. And them taters and peas, and sparrowgrass—well I'll guv up. It's prime, and that's all I know 'bout it."

A delicious pudding was ready to follow the course of substantial. This Frank dallied with. He had never tasted anything so delightful to his palate in his life, and he concluded to make the sensation last as long as possible.

"S'pose I've got a big lot o' time to kill, and I reckon I mought as well kill it eatin' puddin' as fur as it'll go. If I only had somebody to help me, though, I'd guv him half the grub fur the sake o' his comp'ny."

But even a pudding has its end, and no appetite is inexhaustible.

Frank rose at last and stretched himself.

"I mought eat more, I s'pose," he considered, "but there ain't no use in a fellow makin' a hog of hisself jist 'cause he's got a free blow. Reckon I'll go take another squint at the papers, like the bloods do at the hotels arter dinner."

He strolled to his sitting-room, picked up the newspaper he had previously dropped, and yawned over it for some fifteen minutes.

"Wonder if I ain't gittin' sleepy," he asked himself. "Guess I'll take a snooze anyhow. Jist fur a time-killer."

He opened the door of the dining-room on his way to the bedchamber.

If he had been surprised before, he was even more so now. He rubbed his eyes as if he was not right sure but they were playing him some trick.

There stood the table, but a strange change had taken place in its contents. The remnants of the meal had vanished. The red cloth had been replaced. But in the center of the table reposed a silver and cut-glass fruit-stand, filled with a tempting array of peaches, oranges, bananas, and other luscious fruit.

"Well!" exclaimed the doubly-amazed boy. "Words is superfluous! But my brain 'll cave in if this keeps up!"

He looked up at the ceiling, with a half expectation of seeing a watermelon vine, with its great globes of fruit depending thence.

Then he looked at the walls, with some idea of seeing them trellised with strawberry vines, and upholstered with vases of currant jelly.

But the fairy-work had not proceeded this far, and he concluded to go on and take his nap.

"I ain't 'spectin' to have no dreams," he muttered. "Ther' ain't no dreams kin come up to what's been goin' on 'bout here, and ther's no use in 'em tryin' it on."

The sofa in the bedroom was very soft and inviting, and the captive boy, weary with his emotions, and with a twinge of pain in his cut scalp, soon sunk into a deep slumber.

How long his sleep continued, he knew not, but when he awoke there was a shadow of gloom in the apartment.

The light which entered at the skylight had declined, and it was evident that evening was coming on.

He had taken a very long afternoon nap. He arose, washed his face at the marble and rose-wood wash-stand, and strolled listlessly about the chamber.

Then a curiosity to see if anything had transpired during his absence led him back through the rooms.

Everything was as he had left it, until he reached the dining-room. Here he discovered that a new change had taken place in the table. It was now furnished with a very pretty tea-service.

Nothing else had been provided, except bread and butter and some thin-cut slices of cake. An oil lamp stood lighted at one end of the table.

"Lucky I stowed in a good dinner, 'cause they've guv me thin pickin' fur supper," he con-

sidered. "That's the 'ristocratic fashion, I calculate."

He was not at all hungry, and after drinking a cup of tea, and some light picking at the food, he pushed back from the table.

"I reckon I'd best freeze onto that lamp 'fore it slides through an invisible keyhole, like them other things," he said to himself. "'Tain't my reg'lar bed-time yit, and it won't suit my complexion to toddle 'round here in the dark."

He took the lamp and carried it to the sitting-room, where he placed it on the table. Then he went to the book-case to see if it contained any volume to his fancy.

But after a short time, struck by a sudden thought, he left there, glided noiselessly to the door leading into the dining-room, and peered through its open crack.

He had hoped to catch the secret of the transformation. He was too late. There stood the table, but the tea-service had disappeared. Only the fruit-stand remained.

"Well, I'll swow!" ejaculated Frank. "It jist beats bugs! But they ain't playin' with no baby now, nary time. I'll catch their racket yet. If I don't I'll sell out."

He was getting on his mettle and meant business. The situation was not so tiresome to him now as it had been. There was a point of mystery to be investigated.

He walked quietly back to the book-case, helped himself to a volume of short stories, and dropped into a reclining-chair beside the light.

The book proved to be a very interesting one, and Frank enjoyed it hugely. How many hours he read he could not have told, but he was in condition for another nap when he at length sought the bed-chamber, and stretched his form on its luxurious couch.

"Things is a-boomin'," he said to himself, as his head sunk in the soft and delicately perfumed pillow. "This is slightly better than a straw shake-down, and a log o' wood fur a pillar. If a chap only had a chance to play hooky now and then, I wouldn't keer whether school kept or not."

Five minutes afterward he was fast asleep. Day had dawned when he next awoke. He looked around him with a momentary confusion of senses, and then threw off his silken coverings, and stepped out to the richly-carpeted floor.

He was about to dress when the open door of the bath-room caught his eye.

"That's jist the idee," he cried, gayly. "I wasn't born a 'ristocrat, but I'm gittin' broke in to it. There ain't as much room fur to strike out here as in one of the docks, but ther' ain't no policeman, to make a feller grab his duds and hook it."

It took Frank some little time to learn the secrets of the bath tub. But he was an apt scholar, and soon caught the idea. There were two faucets, running hot and cold water.

But the cold was most to his taste, and he enjoyed the bath hugely, even though taking a swim was quite out of the question.

An hour had been consumed by the time he had dressed himself. He now started for a morning walk around the short circle of his rooms, with some faint hope of breakfast in his inner fancy.

There it was, fresh and inviting! Coffee, fresh rolls and butter, a bit of tender steak, a dish of nicely browned fried potatoes.

Frank was getting broken in to this sort of living, and it would not have been easy for him now to go back to his former scant and coarse fare and rough service.

He ate his breakfast with the daintiness of a born epicure. He had not forgotten Mr. Bidding's lessons.

Breakfast over, he strolled to the library, took up the book which he had partly read the night before, and sat down for another dip into its contents.

And so passed Frank's first twenty-four hours in his luxurious prison. We have described it in some detail from the strangeness of its incidents. But stranger things yet were to follow.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MYSTERY BEGINS TO UNFOLD.

THE conditions of Frank Hearty's new life, as we have described them, had their agreeable features, but as the first day lengthened into a week, and this into a month, his splendid imprisonment grew decidedly tiresome.

There was only one thing sustained him against the wearing weariness of solitary imprisonment, and that was the mystery which surrounded him, and which he had not yet unraveled.

Search as closely as he would, he could find

no trace of secret door or other means of entrance to his prison.

Watch as patiently as he could, the secret of the table remained a secret still. Hours of patient diligence would pass by and the table remain unchanged, and then, in ten minutes of negligence, it would be found to be transformed.

On one occasion he closely watched the dining-room the whole day, from daylight to dark. Yet the whole day passed without the slightest movement taking place, and the only result was that he went hungry to bed.

That scheme did not pay well enough to be repeated. Then another idea dawned on his brain. There must be a watch kept on him—how, he could not tell, but the fact seemed evident.

He concluded to try the cat and mouse business. By a seeming negligence and then a sudden spring at the dining-room door, he might catch the table in the very act of its mysterious change.

It was a very judicious scheme, but the sharp boy was working against people who knew a trick worth two of that.

And this he very quickly learned.

Dropping his newspaper, in which he had seemed absorbed, at the instant in which he supposed the change would be taking place, he made a wild dash at the dining-room door, grasped the handle, and sought to fling it open.

To his surprise and chagrin, it failed to yield. Here was a new mystery. The door was locked.

Turning sharply, he dashed back through the other rooms, and in a few seconds had reached the door leading into the dining-room from the other direction.

He found himself checked in the same way. This door, too, refused to open. It also was locked.

Frank fell back in an amazement that was not unmixed with fright. It began to seem to him as if there was something supernatural about all this. What living person could have got into that room and locked those doors, unknown to him?

With an angry twitch he gasped the door handle again and turned it. It yielded, and the door opened. The opposite door also now stood a crack open.

Here was more mystery.

But what mainly attracted Frank's attention was the fact that the relics of the dinner of which he had partaken had vanished from the table, with its dishes, and had been replaced with the customary after-dinner fruit stand.

Further investigation showed him that this was the usual method. The doors were always locked during the short intervals in which the change took place.

"I'm most ready to guv up and kick the bucket," declared Frank desperately. "I can't git out, and I can't find out how the thing's did, and you never see'd nobody half so tired of it as I'm gittin'."

"Like to know what it's all 'bout. There must be somethin' high in the wind for folks to make such a blamed fuss over a street rat like me. Reckon detective Tim put it square when he said as how there must be money in it. The chaps as is keepin' me here is spendin' money flush, and you bet they're calculatin' to get it back onto me somehow."

"Maybe they will, but I rather reckon they won't. I don't mind coaxin', but I'm down on drivin', and if they think they've got a rag baby to play with they're barkin' up the wrong tree."

Frank was getting his spirit up. Any effort to coerce him was not likely to prove profitable.

The period to which we have brought the outside passed inside without any change in the situation. Three months had gone, and Frank Hearty was still a close prisoner!

The only change was that instead of becoming cowed by his imprisonment he had grown bitter and revengeful. In all that period he had not heard a word spoken nor seen a human face. A daily paper came up with his food every morning, and this was his only communication with the outside world.

He had managed, by putting all his wit to work, to climb up to the skylight. But his effort to raise it was in vain. It opened about six inches, and then resisted his utmost efforts.

He looked out the opening. There was a steep roof below him, which seemed to be higher than all surrounding buildings. He caught a glimpse of the roofs of New York in the distance, with some landmarks which gave him a general idea of the section of the city in which

he was. But this was the extent of his discoveries.

On another occasion the desperate captive gathered a bunch of newspapers, and was on the point of setting fire to them, with the forlorn hope that the flames might lead in some way to his escape.

But he checked his desperate impulse in time.

"A feller mought as well be dead and cavortin' round with the angels as keepin' house here," he said. "I s'pose they're a kind of jelly customers, 'thout bones or teeth; but I calculate as they'd be better company than I got here. Dunno, though, as I'm quite ready to kick the bucket until I find out what all this's about. And I know I'd be choked off with smoke afore anybody got in."

He replaced the lamp. The scheme was too desperated even for him. He was not going to give his foes the satisfaction of getting rid of him that way. And he did badly want to live long enough to get to the bottom of this mystery.

Why did they not let him know what they wanted? They were wasting good victuals on him which they might save. Was there any way to ask them? Yes, by means of the dining-table.

Here was an idea. But how was he to put it into practice? He had neither pencil, pen nor ink.

His difficulty did not detain Frank long. Some soot from the lamp-wick, and a spoonful of vinegar from the cruet gave him a substitute for ink, and a sharpened chicken-bone served for pen.

By the next meal he had written his desired appeal on the fly-leaf of a book.

"Look here, Mr. Somebody; if you don't think this is played out, then y u better sell out your brains and git a new s-t. What do you want? Show yer hand. No use goin' on base-ballin' this way."

Such was the precious epistle which the captive left on his dinner-plate, with the hope that it would bring some response from below.

He was not deceived in his hope.

When the table returned, the edge of a folded paper peered out from between two oranges in the fruit basket.

Frank grasped it with wild eagerness, his heart throbbing high with expectation. It was the first break in his weary round of imprisonment.

The communication ran as follows, in a bold hand:

"I am not ready yet to declare my purpose. One month more must pass. Then, if you are wise, your imprisonment will end."

There was no signature to this strange document. It was by no means satisfactory to the impatient captive. He was not to be put off so easily. He sent down an answer asking for something more definite, but no response came.

The boy occupied himself in writing appeals to his jailer. But in vain. The month passed, and no further word of answer came.

Then, one morning, on opening his napkin, a scrap of paper fell from it to his feet.

His appetite for breakfast instantly vanished. He snatched up the paper and opened it with nervous haste.

It read as follows:

"The time of your probation is over. We have done our best to make it a pleasant one, and hope you have enjoyed it. There is a paper for you to sign. That done you are free. Answer whether or not you are willing to sign."

A pencil had fallen with the paper. Frank snatched it up, and in a burst of indignation hastily wrote on the back of the letter sheet:

"I'll see you ten miles t'other side o' Jordan 'fore I'll do it. You ain't g' in' to git rid o' me that easy, hossfly. I'm here, and I'm not goin' till I git tired o' playin' big-bug."

Dropping this in the sugar-bowl he proceeded to eat his breakfast with great satisfaction.

From that time forward a change took place in the state of affairs.

Every morning the demand he should sign the paper came up with the breakfast service, and every morning a defiant answer returned with the empty dishes.

Frank decidedly enjoyed this change in the situation. There was something to look forward to, and he occupied himself in devising spicy answers.

But there was another feature in the programme that was not quite so agreeable.

His meals began to fall off in quantity and quality. The splendid table service disappeared piece by piece, and was replaced by coarse ware.

The delicate food was succeeded by less pala-

table victuals, and scarcely enough of these for his light appetite.

This continued until by the end of another month every particle of table-ware had disappeared, and his meals consisted of coarse bread and water, laid on a bare table.

And of this there was scarcely enough to keep soul and body together. Yet this was not as hard to Frank as it would have been to many others. He had been in the same boat many a time before.

"They're tryin' to starve me inter terms. Let's see who kin stand it the longest," he ejaculated.

Yet he soon found that his opponents held the trump cards. The quantity of bread rapidly decreased, until it completely vanished. A day came when the table remained empty from morning to night.

The game had reached its finale.

The obstinate captive went hungry for two days, and then his resolution gave way.

"Send up your blasted old paper," he wrote. "This thing is gittin' too monotonous. Switch it along, and I'll sling my name to it."

The next meal brought up a legal-looking sheet of folded paper, with pen and ink. Beside it lay a folded letter sheet.

This Frank first opened and examined. It contained instructions:

"The document must not be read, but simply signed and returned. Sign at the lower left-hand corner where you will find the pencil-mark. Sign with the name of Francis Archer."

Frank dropped the paper in surprise.

"Who the blazes is Francis Archer? Never heered o' sich a chap. And I'm to sign it 'thout readin' it! Reckon I will, muchy. I ain't that sort o' lunatic."

There was something further on the letter of instructions, which he now read:

"If you fail to obey these directions implicitly, or attempt to read the document, it will be at your peril. You will never leave that place alive. And this is from one who never fails to keep his word."

"Tell that to the marines. If I sign it I mought never leave here alive. Bet you high you can't play that racket on this chicken. I'm goin' through that there paper if the stars fall."

Heedless of the threat, he took up the folded document, retired to his sitting-room, took an easy-chair, unfolded the mysterious paper, and proceeded with great coolness to make himself master of its contents.

It was by no means easy reading. It was couched in all the ridiculous language of the law, yet Frank was keen enough to make out its general purport.

He found that it referred to a mining property at a place called Red Gulch, Nevada, owned by James Archer, and left by him to his son Francis Archer, on his death, some eighteen years previous. The document was a bill of sale of this mine, for value received, by the said Francis Archer to Wilson Kite, late of Red Gulch, and now resident in the city of New York.

A light dawned on Frank's mind. There was nothing to show the value of the mine, but he had no doubt that it was of high value; that he was its real owner; that he was the son of James Archer, and that a set of sharks were working a game to deprive him of his inheritance.

"Said I'll sign it, and I'm the boss to keep my word," he said. "I hope it'll do 'em good."

He proceeded to do so. He wrote the name of Francis Archer in the proper place. Then he looked at the document with a queer smile.

"There's millions in it, I s'pose," he remarked. "But I bet they don't finger it. They're barkin' up the wrong tree this time."

With a quick rip he tore off the corner containing the signature. Then he proceeded to rend the paper into fragments. These he laid in a heap on the table and retired.

Fifteen minutes afterward he returned to the dining-room. The fragments had gone, but they were replaced by an open sheet which he hastened to read. It was of startling significance.

"Reckless fool, you have dared your fate. The die is cast. You shall never leave this place alive!"

CHAPTER X.

ANOTHER STEP TOWARD THE GOAL.

To know too much is more dangerous than to know too little, in certain situations. And this the daring prisoner was destined to discover.

It had evidently been the purpose of his captors to keep him in ignorance of his inheritance, to get his signature, and then set him adrift, without knowledge of who they were or where he had been.

His reading of the paper had destroyed this plan. He knew too much and might cause

trouble. The threat made him was not an idle one.

The reckless prisoner began to believe this when he took time to think over his impulsive action.

"I s'pose the chap that's locked in a tiger's cage oughtn't to stir up the tiger," he reflected. "He oughter smooth down the animile in that there situation. Shouldn't wonder if I'd been a thunderin' fool."

The milk was spilled now, however. There was no use to cry over it.

But another thought came to Frank's busy brain that gave him some new reflections. James Archer had died eighteen years before. If he was his son he must be older than he fancied.

Suppose he was three years old when his father died. That would make him twenty-one.

Frank looked down at himself. He was small of size, but strongly built. He rubbed his hand thoughtfully over his chin. He felt there a strong suspicion of a beard.

"That paper wouldn't be no use signed by a boy. I don't feel much like a man yet, but it looks as if them coons was holdin' back till I was twenty-one, and then goin' fer my signatur."

Here was an interesting subject for thought. He flung himself in his favorite easy-chair, and set himself to try and work it out.

Yet he did not find it easy to think. An unaccountable drowsiness had come over him.

His senses seemed leaving him. He felt a choking sensation, and sprung up in alarm from his chair. It was just such a feeling as he had felt once before in the cellar of Clare Lacy's house.

"Was the room being filled with a choking gas? The frightened boy sprung up from his chair. He found himself reeling as he tried to walk. In a minute more he dropped like a log to the floor in dead insensibility.

As to how long he lay in that condition the prisoner was utterly ignorant. It might have been five minutes or five days for all he knew to the contrary.

After that unknown interval his senses slowly returned. He moved slightly, yawned like one waking from sleep, and slowly opened his eyes.

He was surrounded by utter and midnight darkness.

It felt chilly beneath him. He let his hands fall. They touched cold and damp earth.

Thoroughly alarmed, he sprung wildly to his feet. He had struck something of stony hardness, and he fell again in a senseless heap to the floor.

But we must leave the unfortunate captive for the present, and return to our other characters whom we left engaged in efforts for his rescue.

Strange as had been Frank's experience during those long months, the perplexity of his friends outside was quite equal to it.

Detective Dodge had used every effort to discover the whereabouts of the missing boy, but without avail.

Clare Lacy had shown no sign of any guilty knowledge. Nothing suspicious had been observed in her actions.

Jake Price, the shadower, had been equally unlucky. He had failed to catch a glimpse of the man of whom he was in search.

As for the two gentlemen who were interested in this affair, their anxiety seemed to increase. This was reasonable in the case of Mr. Bidding, who wished to adopt Frank as his son. It was unusual in that of Mr. Marsden, who was merely seeking an office boy.

As for the western inquiry of the detective nothing of value had yet come of it. He had succeeded in tracing Birdwell and Marsden to some mining towns in Nevada and California. Yet their business in these towns seemed perfectly innocent.

They had been acquaintances. That was all he had yet learned. There was a mystery of which he had not yet found the key. He felt a strong inclination to take a trip West and look up this affair for himself.

But there was work to do in New York first. If the missing boy could not be found the whole affair fell through.

He must put out his strength in this direction.

Yet what was to be done? Five months had passed, and not a trace had been discovered.

"I must try a new line of operations," he declared, decidedly. "The innocent and shady plan has been pursued long enough. There is nothing in it. We must see what squeezing will do. And Clare Lacy is the person to be squeezed."

At eight o'clock that night Detective Dodge, accompanied by two policemen, approached the

house near which Frank Hearty had last been seen.

One of the officers passed through the gate and made his way to the rear. The other stationed himself across the street, and watched the upper windows. All the lower windows were closed.

The detective rung the bell. He waited awhile, but there was no answer. Then he pulled more strongly. Finally he jerked until the bell-peal could be heard across the street.

Yet the door remained closed.

"They must be all dead or asleep," he said, angrily, as he rattled on the door with his fists, and furiously shook it.

This also produced no response.

"We must get in there somehow," he remarked. "I wonder what has become of the spy I placed on this house. I thought he was a trusty man. If this is the way he does his duty it is no wonder that we are in the dark."

During the assault on the house no trace of the police spy had been seen.

After a consultation with the officers it was decided to try and effect an entrance from the rear. There was a shed over the back door, with a window above it.

The lighter of the officers was lifted by his companions until he was able to clamber to the roof of the shed. He tried the window. It opened easily. In a few minutes more the kitchen door stood unbolted, and the whole party entered.

A search succeeded. The interior of the house was thoroughly investigated, in the absence of the proprietors, for not a soul was found.

Every scrap of furniture was examined, all closets and drawers opened, the pockets of the clothing searched, but without effect.

A like examination was made of all the written paper that could be found. The detective hoped to discover some significant letters, possibly some important address, or some document of value to his search.

He was disappointed. Clare Lacy, if young, was an old hand at this business. She had been too wise to leave any incriminating evidence.

With a growl of disappointment, the detective led the way to the cellar. This seemed equally innocent. The only peculiar feature about it was that a square portion had been partitioned off in one corner.

"A potato vault," he remarked, as he entered it.

They held up their candles and examined the inclosure.

"Looks as if there had been a trap in the floor there at one time," said one of the officers, as he pointed upward.

There were visible the lines of a square cut through the floor between the joists. But it was evidently not used as a trap now. It had no bolt or hinges, and was nailed fast.

Going to the rooms above, they found that an entry ran above it, and that this was closely covered by carpet.

"It is not used as a trap now, at any rate," remarked the detective.

He little dreamed that the missing boy had dropped through that trap five months before, and so had fallen into the hands of his shrewd and cunning foes.

"I am afraid that this expedition is not going to be a profitable one," said the detective, as he led the way to the kitchen.

He poked around there, in a somewhat aimless way. A candlestick lay on the ledge above the range. Its bottom portion held some white ashes.

These he stirred up. Beneath them was a small scrap of scorched letter-paper.

"There has been a letter burned here, and very recently," he remarked.

He examined the fragment of paper closely. It held a name, evidently the signature, just visible on the browned surface. It was partly gone. He read:

"—Ison Kite."

"Wilson Kite, probably," he remarked. "Our expedition may have paid, after all, gentlemen. Here is a name that somebody is afraid of. It may be the lost clew. Let us go."

They left the house in the same mode they had entered. There was nothing to show to the inmates on their return that strange feet had invaded their home.

Where was Clare Lacy? That is the question which it is now our duty to answer. At the moment in which her residence was being searched, she sat in the sumptuously furnished parlor of another residence in a distant part of the city.

Opposite her sat a rather tall and stout gen-

tleman. He was not bad looking, except that his nose was over large. There was a certain haughty and imperious look in his face like that of one accustomed to command.

"Was it safe to venture, Clare?" he asked, in a softened tone.

"Yes," she replied, calmly. "I know the situation thoroughly. I was followed on my way here, as I expected to be. But I gave him the slip."

"Sure?"

"Do I often make mistakes?"

"No, Clare; I will give you that credit."

"But about the prisoner?" she anxiously inquired. "Is he still obstinate?"

"He has sealed his fate!" was the cold and implacable answer.

"How?" she hurriedly asked.

"By reading that document against my express threats."

"He could not understand it," she replied, lifting her eyes with a dubious expression to his face.

"He is no fool," was the answer. "He has learned more than I intended. See here; this is the result."

He opened a drawer and placed before her a heap of torn fragments of paper.

"That was the way in which he sent it back to me."

"The bold little rogue!" she cried, with a show of admiration. "He has been too much for you, Wilson."

"Hardly," answered her companion, with a knowing smile.

"Why, that is of no use to you."

"But this is."

He produced a document, a *fac-simile* of that which Frank had destroyed. And in the proper location was attached the signature which Frank had written—"Francis Archer." This was duly witnessed by two names.

She looked at it with a suppressed apprehension.

"Then he signed another!" she cried.

"Not so. But I understand the art of transferring names. Look at that. Can you discover anything wrong?"

"No."

"Yet his name was written on a strip of paper as thin as a shadow. I have stripped it off like a flake from the other document, and attached it here so firmly that an expert could not detect it."

"And your witnesses?"

"They are safe men."

"Then you have won the game, and defeated your antagonists?"

"Marsden and Birdwell played shrewdly, but they played against the wrong gamester. I have saved my fortune."

"But the boy?" she asked meaningly. "Where is he? What do you intend?"

"He will never trouble us again," was the implacable answer.

"You do not mean—"

"No matter what. That is my affair."

"Where is he?" she asked impulsively.

He gave a muttered answer.

"There?" she asked in a tone of horror. "Then you intend—"

"Not to be ruined by the young idiot."

She sat looking at him with a strange stare in her eyes.

"I wish to see him," she at length remarked.

"What for?"

"No matter what. I must see him."

"You cannot."

"I will!" Her voice was imperious.

"I did not think you was such a baby, Clare. He cannot be released. I will listen to no soft-hearted nonsense."

"I did not ask for his release. I know it would be useless. But I must see him."

He looked at her angrily. He saw a low, fixed brow, set lips, and a deep expression of determination.

The imperious man had found his match in the woman before him.

After a minute more he took a key from his pocket and threw it on the table.

"If you will, you will. Trust me to see that he does not make a fool of you," he declared, with stern energy.

Clare took the key without a word of reply. She evidently knew what she was about.

Ten minutes afterward she stood alone before a door in the underground region of the house. It was stout and firm enough to serve as the door to a prison.

Opening it with the key which she had received she found herself in a winding passage. This led for some distance, and ended in another door.

This she opened also.

The lamp which she bore lit up a narrow, dark, vault-like chamber, as damp and unpleasant as a grave vault.

On its bare earthen floor sat the figure of Frank Hearty, the picture of misery and wretchedness.

He sprang up hastily as the light penetrated the chamber, and looked hopefully into the fair face before him.

"It is you!" he cried, in a joyful voice. "You are come to save me! To take me from this horrible place!"

She shook her head.

"I dare not," she replied.

"You are not going to leave me here—to starve?"

She looked at him with a peculiar glance—an expression of deep interest.

"I am not in sympathy with your foe," she said. "But he would kill you, and perhaps me, rather than let you escape. There is but one way, and that is a desperate one."

"So am I desperate. Show it to me."

She crossed the dungeon to an iron grate in the wall. This she unlocked with a key which she took from her pocket. It revealed the entrance to a narrow, dark tunnel about two feet square.

"That is your only hope of escape," she said.

CHAPTER XI.

THINGS INSIDE AND THINGS OUTSIDE.

THE door of the dismal dungeon was again locked, and Frank remained in the silence, gloom, and horror of his dreadful situation.

But one thing remained, that gave a very different aspect to the situation. A ray of hope lighted up the darkness of the dungeon.

Clare Lacy had not left the lamp behind her. The physical darkness was intense. But she had left what was of more value to him—the glowing light of the hope of liberty.

She had not left the cell for five minutes before the prisoner turned in search of the avenue of escape which she had opened.

"There's no use stayin' here," he muttered. "I'm gittin' weaker every minute fer want o' grub. Better streak it while I've got some muscle left. There's one good pint in it—I've fell away so I could a'most crawl through a knot-hole."

It took some groping in that dense darkness to find the entrance to the underground tunnel.

This discovered, the desperate captive plunged into it without hesitation, confiding in the promise that it would lead him to liberty.

The place proved so narrow that progress was not easy. He could not crawl on hands and knees, but was forced to drag himself forward, foot by foot, by aid of his hands alone.

It was a sort of a slow, worming process that rapidly exhausted his strength.

His progress was very slow. Hours seemed to go by, and yet he apparently had not advanced many feet. He was forced, every few minutes, to stop and rest. If this continued much longer his powers would utterly disappear.

The air, too, was close and choking. He breathed with difficulty. Mephitic vapors filled the tunnel, and robbed him still further of his strength.

Finally he reached a point at which further progress seemed impossible. The upper surface of the tunnel had yielded to the weight upon it, and sagged down until the passage was fatally narrowed.

He felt it carefully, while his heart sunk with a deadly sensation of alarm. Was he to be forced, after this bright promise of safety, to give it up, and retreat again to his dungeon of death?

"Better be squeezed to death than starved to death," he bitterly murmured. "If a chap's got to kick the bucket, I don't see no use waltzin' round it. Here goes! I'm so empty I don't feel no bigger nor a hoss-hair, and maybe I mought pull through."

He pushed himself forward with hands and feet. The tunnel rapidly narrowed. It touched him on every side. It pressed in upon him. It became almost impossible to move hand or foot.

In wild desperation he made one fierce push forward. This carried him six inches deeper into the narrow cavity. And there he stuck fast.

Horror-stricken, he wildly worked his hands and feet. The effect was simply to wedge him more tightly into that terrible trap.

He tried to draw back. But it was too late. It was no longer possible to advance or retreat. A wild cry of alarm broke from his lips.

He was fast in a terrible underground trap, from which escape was impossible. The only

hope in life that remained to him was that death would soon come from the foul and poisoned air, and relieve him from the horrors of slow starvation.

And in that moment of mortal dread, one thought rendered his coming fate yet more hard to bear—that he had been treacherously deceived and lured to death by the fair-faced traitress who had held out to him a false promise of escape.

"She mought 'a' left me alone!" he muttered. "I was tight enough back there, 'thout bein' coaxed here to squeeze myself to death like a rat in a hole."

And then a fatal insensibility began to creep over him, the natural effect of the poisoned gases that filled that dismal hole.

At the moment in which the entrapped captive sunk into the deadly lethargy of coming death, Detective Dodge was seated in his office, full of plans for his rescue.

He had recently returned from his search of Clare Lacy's residence, and was engaged in studying the scorched scrap of paper that lay before him.

"Wilson Kite! Wilson Kite!" he muttered. "Have I not heard that name somewhere before? It is not on the police records, that much is certain. It belongs to no known villain of New York."

He was interrupted by a somewhat faint knock on the door.

"Come in," he cried, instinctively covering the scrap with his hand.

The door opened, and a person of short stature entered. There was a look of uneasiness and confusion upon his face.

"So," exclaimed the detective, sourly, "you are here. I have been expecting you. What have you to report? That the house you were watching has been entered and searched by the police without your seeing them?"

"For that I cannot answer," rejoined the man diffidently. "I was in pursuit of the young woman. They were my orders."

"Well, where did you track her?"

"Nowhere. I lost the trail."

"You did?" The detective's look was withering.

"I did my best," faltered the spy. "It was an accident."

The detective gave a snort of contempt. He did not take the trouble to ask the spy how he had been thrown from the track.

"Where was this?" he coldly demanded.

"Near the Fifth avenue entrance to the Park."

"Very well. See if you can do this job better." He seized a pen and hastily dashed off two words on a scrap of paper. "Read that name."

"Wilson Kite."

"That is it. I must know the residence of that man before to-morrow night. Never mind the Directory. It is not there. Start from the point where you lost your prey. Try the grocers, the drug stores, the letter carriers. Search the whole district. Find me that man. Do you understand?"

"I will find him if he is in that quarter of the city."

"If not there search the whole city. And now, good-night. Take a night's rest and sleep your wits back into shape."

The discomfited spy withdrew, crestfallen before the severe scorn of his employer.

The baffled detective sat frowning and growling bitterly to himself.

"That woman ought to have a medal!" he ejaculated. "I'll be shot if she hasn't humbugged the sharpest men in New York for six months! But there is an end to every game, and I calculate she has lost her right bower."

He glanced again at the scrap of paper with the name.

Then, as if struck with a sudden idea, he drew up a letter sheet, dipped pen in ink, and began to rapidly dash off an epistle.

This completed, he took several copies of it, inclosed them in envelopes, and directed them to several places in the mining region of the West.

"We will see if Wilson Kite has ever figured there," he said.

Seizing his hat he left the room, and proceeded toward his home. He had finished his day's work.

There was an idea working in the detective's astute brain, but it was too late that night to put it into effect. It must wait till morning.

Ten o'clock of the next morning found him on the steps of Horace Bidding's aristocratic mansion.

A sharp pull at the bell quickly brought a servant to the door.

"Is Mr. Bidding in?"

"Yes, sir."

"Take him my card."

The servant did so, returning almost instantly.

"Will you please walk up, sir? He is in the library."

Ushered by the servant, the officer ascended a fine flight of stairs, and was shown into a small but handsomely furnished room on the second floor, where Mr. Bidding awaited him.

The moment the door closed he said, with some eagerness:

"You bring some good news, I hope."

"That is a question," answered the detective, coolly. "I have but a scrap of news. Whether it is good or bad is to be decided. Will you please read this name?"

He stood with one hand resting on the table, and his eyes fixed with searching keenness on Mr. Bidding's face, as he handed him the scorched scrap.

The moment the gentleman's eyes fell upon it he uttered a slight exclamation, while his face turned a shade pale.

"You recognize that name, then?"

"I—I have—that is to say, I once knew—But where did you get this? And why do you connect it with the abduction?"

"Because the man whose name is there written knows best where the lost boy may be found."

"But that is impossible! He is—he is in Nevada. How could he—"

"Where in Nevada?"

"At Red Gulch. At least he was there years ago, when I knew him. Of course it is quite possible he may be in New York now."

Mr. Bidding had evidently been taken aback by the sight of that name, and in his confusion and excitement had let out more than he would probably have done in a cooler moment.

"You do not know his place of residence in New York, then?"

"I did not know he was here."

"Nor the name under which he passes?"

"I never knew him by any other name than that."

"I am much obliged, Mr. Bidding. He is here now, and it is to him we owe the abduction of Frank Hearty. If it is in the power of the police he shall be found and the boy rescued."

"Spare no money in your efforts, Mr. Dodge," cried Mr. Bidding eagerly. "I will bear all expenses."

Leaving the aristocratic mansion the detective made his way to the business portion of the city, and entered the store of Marsden & Co. Here he tried the same scheme as had proved so effectual in the case of Mr. Bidding.

But the cool merchant was a man of different caliber. It is true he showed an instant's surprise and confusion on reading the name.

But he in a moment regained his composure, and was not to be thrown off his base by any questions of the detective.

He freely acknowledged that he had heard the name of Wilson Kite. But who he was, where he was, or what other names he bore, he was quite unable to tell.

"You are a keen fellow, Marsden," said the detective to himself on leaving the office. "Luckily your competitor in this mysterious scheme is not so keen. Bidding has let the cat out of the bag, if I am not mistaken."

He made his way to the telegraph office, wrote a message, and directed it to be sent to Red Gulch, Nevada.

"The answer may be some time in arriving. Send it to my office when it comes."

The detective now proceeded to his office. He had abundance of business ahead of him, but there was one thing that clung to his mind all that day, the anxiety to settle the matter about Wilson Kite.

Evening approached. He had received reports from his agent. No person of that name had yet been found.

He directed that the search should be extended, and more agents employed in it.

Night fell. Darkness gradually crept over the city. About nine o'clock a telegraph messenger came to his office with a message.

He tore it open and read.

"Wilson Kite well known here. What is wanted?"

He wrote a reply:

"Telegraph at once full information about him."

The messenger withdrew and silence reigned. The detective shut his desk and was about starting for his home, when the door again opened and another form appeared.

A cry of almost consternation broke from his lips.

Before him stood the figure of Frank Hearty—pale, thin, ghost-like in color, yet with the old defiant expression in his face.

CHAPTER XII.

CLARE LACY TO THE RESCUE.

WE left Frank Hearty in a situation from which escape seemed impossible. We find him, on the evening of the next day, alive and well, though somewhat the worse for wear.

How did he escape from his tight squeeze in the tunnel? That is the question which will naturally be asked, and which now demands an answer.

He owed his safety, in fact, to the desperate cry of alarm and terror which he gave when he found himself pinched in that dreadfully close fit.

He was indeed, nearer the end of the tunnel than he dreamed of. It widened immediately beyond him, and six inches more would have carried his shoulders past the narrowest place.

But if it had been an inch only he had not the strength to make it.

He owed his escape to outside aid.

When Clare Lacy left his underground dungeon she proceeded straight to the room in which she had left Wilson Kite.

He was no longer there.

After a brief consideration she wrote a short note, and laid it upon the table, with the key upon it.

Then she left the room, and turned toward the front of the house, as if with the intention of leaving it.

But a new thought arrested her footsteps. She paused and hesitated, and then turned back. This time her steps took her toward the rear of the house.

Unbolting the rear door she passed through into the yard beyond. She had not met a living soul.

The yard was a large one. It was, in fact, used as a garden, and displayed a handsome array of bushes and low trees.

Through these she made her way back toward a small, vine-covered summer-house at the extreme end.

Stooping down, she lifted a trap-door in the floor of this.

It revealed a wide, deep cavity, with moldy wooden steps leading down.

Without hesitation she descended these steps. It was here intensely dark, and she struck a match and lit a wax taper which she took from her pocket.

The light of this showed a dank and mold-covered cavity, not very deep, for a short flight of steps brought her to the bottom.

Into the side of this opened a dark and yawning hole, of considerable width. It was the outlet of the tunnel.

At this moment a loud and startling cry of mortal terror met her ears.

With an impulse of alarm she flew up the steps in deadly fear of something supernatural.

Then, as a fresh idea came to her she returned, and held her taper in the mouth of the tunnel, gazing in as far as she could.

"Has something dreadful happened?" she anxiously inquired. "That must be his voice!"

The light burned dim in that thick and foul atmosphere.

For a while it looked as if it would go out. Then, as the fresh air from above made its way down it burnt more brightly, until it gave a strong, clear light.

The air was purifying itself.

Gazing into the cavity, which was here quite wide, she could vaguely discern some object at a considerable distance within that seemed to fill up the whole space.

She asked, in a cautious tone:

"Is it you? Can you hear me?"

No answer was returned.

"Something has surely happened to the boy," she anxiously said. "What it is I must discover. I cannot leave him to perish."

Heedless of the condition of the walls of the tunnel, which left plentiful soil-marks on her clothes, she crept into the cavity, holding the light before her.

It was here much wider than the part through which Frank had passed.

In this way she went back for some six feet. Then she stopped and held up the light again.

Before her the tunnel appeared to rapidly narrow, and in its narrowest portion appeared a human head.

The shoulders, visible behind it, filled the whole space, into which they were tightly wedged.

An exclamation of alarm broke from her lips.

"Good Heavens, the tunnel has caved in!" she cried. "It was not like this when I used to pass through it in play in my childhood."

She spoke again to Frank, but received no answer. He was still insensible.

The case seemed a desperate one. Had she lured the captive, with hope of escape, to a horrible death?

She pushed herself forward, as far as she could, into the narrowing portion of the tunnel.

She could now just reach the captive. Laying the light on the floor of the passage, she stretched forward her arms.

She was able to reach his coat collar, which she caught in a desperate clutch.

She pulled with all her strength, but in vain. The wedged body did not move. She jerked, but equally in vain.

She was in despair. What was to be done? She could not leave him there to perish miserably—if he was still alive.

Her efforts, and the fresh air which had made its way into the tunnel, produced one good effect. The flown senses of the captive slowly returned.

"Where am I? What has happened?" he asked feebly.

A sense of joy rushed through her brain.

"Do you not remember?" she asked. "The tunnel, into which I sent you? Are you worn out? Can you do nothing?"

"Maybe I mought push a little," answered Frank, with some return of his energy, as hope came back to him.

"Then push, with all your strength."

She jerked again at his collar. At the same time he pushed forward with all the purchase he could obtain.

He had evidently moved. An inch or two was gained.

"Try it again!" she exclaimed, joyfully. "A little more and you are past the pinch."

A few repetitions of the effort, and Frank's shoulders slipped past the narrowest space to where the widening began.

"Once more."

This time he came forward fully six inches.

A cry of joy broke from the lips of the young woman, who had become wrought up to a strain of nervous excitement.

"You are safe!" she exclaimed. "You can move now without help. Follow me."

Taking up the taper, she cautiously moved backward, until the well-like opening was reached. Frank followed her, more slowly. He was very weak.

Then she led the way up the steps to the summer-house, extinguishing the light as she did so.

The rescued boy fell nervelessly over one of the seats of this structure.

Clare lowered the trap-door and sat beside him.

"I had no idea into what danger I was sending you," she said. "I lived in this house in my childhood, and have often passed through that tunnel in play. Then it was as wide as the outlet. It must have yielded to the weight upon it."

"What was it made for?" asked Frank.

"That I cannot tell. Some whim of the first owner of the mansion."

"Was that place that I've been in for months and months, one of his whims too?"

"Yes," she hastily replied. "Ask me no questions about that. It is enough that I have rescued you. Are you strong enough to move now?"

"I reckon so."

"Then you must go at once. There is no safety here for you. Can you climb?"

"Used I could."

"The wall is not very high. I will help you over."

The brick wall that inclosed the garden was just back of them. With her aid Frank succeeded in grasping its top, and drew himself up.

"Keep quiet about all this," she warned. "If you have no place of shelter, go to my house. I will be there soon."

"All right," cried Frank, as he sprung down on the outside.

Clare brushed the marks of her late adventure from her clothing as well as she could, and re-entered the house, bolting the door behind her.

She encountered no one on going through it, until she reached the front door, where a servant appeared.

He opened the door for her in silence, and she passed out into the street.

At nearly the same moment that she did so, the master of the mansion entered the room where she had left the note and the key.

He picked up the note and read it, with compressed brow.

"Sol! She is going home. And she cuts loose in future from all connection with my schemes. We shall see, my lady. You ought to know me better than that. I wonder if you have been up to any mischief?"

He stepped into the hall.

"John?"

The servant at the door answered.

"Has Miss Lacy gone out?"

"Yes, sir."

"Alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well."

He turned on his heel, and grasping the key, descended to the cellar portion of the mansion.

A minute or two brought him to the dungeon in which his late captive had been confined.

He unlocked the door and entered. The light which he carried sent its illumination throughout every corner of the gloomy chamber.

A malignant smile came upon his face as he perceived that the dismal underground dungeon was empty, and that the grated entrance to the tunnel stood open.

"It is as I thought," he said, with a look of devilish satisfaction.

"Clare has tried to play traitor to me, and release my prisoner. Fool! did she not know me better than that?"

"The boy has gone into the tunnel. He cannot pass through it. I have arranged for that. And he cannot return. He will die like a poisoned rat in his hole!"

As he spoke, he closed and locked the iron grating.

"So much for him! There is no one living now who can dispute my possession to the mine. I have the contract of sale for further security. This tunnel must be walled up at both ends, and everything is safe."

He gave a malignant laugh.

"You do not know the man you have to deal with, Clare Lacy. You have turned traitress! Beware the consequences!"

He turned and left the dungeon, locking the door behind him. His schemes seemed to him secure.

Little did he dream that at that moment his late captive was in the streets, breathing the free air of liberty.

Little did he dream that this captive owed this liberty to the partial starvation to which he had been subjected.

But for his loss of flesh the slender boy could never have forced his stout shoulders through the narrow aperture.

The very means taken to subdue his victim had reacted on the villain. His course of crime was nearing its end.

Little did he dream of all this, however, as he retraced his steps to the upper rooms of the mansion.

"To-night's work has made me a millionaire," he muttered. "Marsden and Birdwell can whistle for the cash they expected to handle. As for Clare Lacy, she has grown dangerous to me. She must be dealt with."

He smiled with the bitterness of a fiend.

CHAPTER XIII.

DETECTIVE DODGE ON HIS ROUNDS.

THE invitation which Frank Hearty had received from his rescuer he did not choose to accept.

He had had sufficient experience of her residence, and preferred not to put his head into such a hornets' nest again.

Very much to the surprise of his Aunt Kitty, he made his appearance at her humble residence at a rather late hour that night.

That the good lady had a hundred questions for him we need not say. But Frank had only one answer for her.

"Let me 'lone. I'm sleepy, and want a snooze. Tell you all 'bout it some other time. Don't be in no hurry wakin' me up to-morrer."

When Frank did waken it was very nearly noon. Then he roused himself, dressed, and took some money from his pocket.

"Had sleep 'nough to last fur this bout," he remarked. "Now I want to fill up on grub. Here's the cash, Aunt Kitty. I want you to buy me dinner 'nough fur three, 'cause I'm hungry 'enough fur half a dozen."

Aunt Kitty's questions that day produced no more effect than on the evening before. Frank was non-committal.

"We've both got our secrets," he declared. "Tell me all you know 'bout me, and then I'll tell you all I know 'bout myself. That's a square bargain."

The good lady evidently did not think so, for she fell into a fit of silence.

Frank was recuperating. He took another

long nap that afternoon, and another very hearty meal that evening.

"Ought to do now. Feel as if I didn't want to eat or sleep fur a week ag'in. Reckon I'll go take a walk."

"Keep away from them boys," warned Aunt Kitty. "It was them got you into trouble before."

"They won't again," responded Frank. "I've got my eye-teeth cut."

About nine that evening, as we have said, he made his appearance in Detective Dodge's office, very much to the surprise of that gentleman.

The detective was not used to let anything startle him, but Frank's ghost-like entrance was a little too much for his nerves.

He sprung across the floor and seized the boy by the shoulder.

"By all that's good!" he exclaimed, "it is himself in solid earnest! You confounded young rascal! where have you been? Answer at once, before I shake all your teeth down your throat!"

"Don't do that jist yit," rejoined Frank, coolly. "Can't spare 'em yet, till I've eat enough grub to square myself up. Been starvin' so long that I s'pect to be hungry fur a clean week."

The detective looked him over.

"The same reprobate as ever," he averred. "He does look older, though. He has the face of a man, and is beginning to grow a beard and mustache. Squat right down, Frank, and tell me the whole story. I have been hunting you for six months, and instead of my finding you, you find me."

"That's what I'm here fur," answered Frank, as he took a chair. "I've got a mighty queer story to tell."

He proceeded to relate the strange incidents through which he had passed, from the moment of his falling through the trap at Clare Lacy's house, to that of his final rescue by the same young lady.

At several points in the story the detective broke in with exclamations.

One of these was where he spoke of the trap through which he had fallen.

"I discovered that trap last night," remarked the detective. "I did not dream of the purpose for which it had been used."

To Frank's story of the mysterious suite of apartments he listened as if to a fairy tale.

"You are making that up on me, you villain," he at length broke out.

"Nary time. It's all gospel."

His next exclamation was when Frank came to the story of the document which he was required to sign, and which he had returned in fragments.

"Now you are getting down to business," cried the detective earnestly. "You read it? Then tell me all about it. Don't leave out a word that you can remember."

"The confounded thing was nearly all 'where-as' and 'aforesaid,'" rejoined Frank. "You never see'd so much lawyer's lingo. But I wasn't quite so green as they tuk me fur, and I got pretty well to the bottom of it."

"It was a bill of sale, 'for value received,' of a mining property at a place called Red Gulch, Nevada."

The detective uttered an exclamation.

"Whom to?" he demanded.

"To somebody named Wilson Kite."

"Good! We are getting on the trail now in earnest. Go on."

"The mine was the property of James Archer. It had been left by will to his son, Francis Archer. And that was the name I was to put to it."

"Francis Archer! Frank Hearty! One is only a corruption of the other. The whole scheme is unfolding. By Jupiter! it is as pretty a piece of work as I've seen in my long experience. Go on. Let me hear the rest."

Frank proceeded with his story with no further interruptions from the deeply interested listener.

"Clare Lacy has redeemed herself," he said at the end. "But I'm bound to know the trick of those rooms. It is a new dodge, and I can't make it out. You have had a remarkable experience, Frank. I hope it sharpened your wits up enough to make you note the house you escaped from. I have been baffled sadly in searching for that house."

"I was too upset to think of anything," acknowledged Frank. "I ran away like a scared rabbit. I s'pose I could tell within two or three blocks of it, and that's the nearest I could go."

"A miss is as good as a mile in this business. No matter. Come home with me. I cannot af-

ford to lose sight of you again. It will not be many days before I am at the bottom of this mystery."

On reaching his office the next morning a telegram awaited Detective Dodge. He hastily tore it open. It was from Red Gulch, Nevada.

Its contents were the following:

"Wilson Kite has resided here at intervals for twenty years past. His business here for most of that time has been as trustee of Blue Stone silver mine. Eighteen years ago the owner of this mine, James Archer, died. He left the mine by will to his son, Francis Archer, then three years old. Wilson Kite, once his partner, was made trustee. Soon after the boy was sent East, and is said to be now in New York. The mine has long been nearly worthless. Not enough dividend to pay for the boy's schooling. A year ago a fine lead was struck, and it is now panning out rich. The court here is calling the guardian to an account with the heir. Wilson Kite is said to be in New York."

"The cat is out of the bag," exclaimed the excited officer. "All but the tip of the tail."

He instantly wrote another telegram and sent it out by an office boy.

"Find out, if you can, the New York address of Wilson Kite. Also give me the Red Gulch record of Julius Marsden, and Horace Bidwell."

An answer came with much promptness:

"Not able to get N. Y. address. Want more time. The two other names known here. Were friends of Archer. Drop out of our records more than sixteen years ago."

"The thing is working," muttered the detective.

He was too impatient to probe the strange mystery of which he had just learned to wait the slow work of his agent in Red Gulch.

Putting on his hat, he left the office. At the door he met the police spy whom he had given orders to seek for the residence of Wilson Kite.

"Not found," this personage reported. "He sails under a false name, I imagine. I will work up another district to-day."

"Let it be this district," replied the detective, rapidly writing some directions on a scrap of paper. "It is there or nowhere."

"All right," rejoined the spy.

Detective Dodge walked on.

His journey took him some distance up-town. He finally reached the residence of Clare Lacy, where he rung the bell.

That young lady herself answered.

The officer handed her his card, on reading which she slightly started.

"I am in the detective service," he remarked, as he took the chair offered him. "I do not wish to conceal the fact; I simply wish to obtain some straight answers to a few questions."

"That depends on the character of the questions," she replied, with a little apprehension showing through the defiant look upon her face.

"Understand me, Miss Lacy. I mean you no harm. You are implicated in an ugly business; I tell you that frankly. But your service last night in rescuing from a dreadful death the boy whom you entrapped into danger will save you from the terrors of the law."

"You are talking in riddles," she replied.

"Then perhaps I had better speak more plainly. Let me say, then, that in the hall here to our left is a concealed trap-door, which has been nailed up since it did the work for which it was intended. The youth whom you entrapped was delivered by you to your confederate, Wilson Kite."

"Wilson Kite," she interrupted, with a growing pallor. "Who is he?"

"Listen to me now, Miss Lacy. I know the whole story, from beginning to end. I know who Wilson Kite is, and the character of his criminal scheme, quite as well as yourself. I know the part you have taken in the business. I am utterly surprised that a lady like you should have any such relations with a man like him. I do not ask the character of these relations."

"There is nothing in them I am ashamed of," she hastily rejoined, with flushed face.

"What is the street and number of Wilson Kite's residence? That is the only question I have to ask. In return for your answer, all proceedings against you in this affair shall be dropped."

"I decline to answer," she firmly replied. "I have finally and forever cut loose from him and his schemes. But I will do nothing to betray him."

There was a decision in her tone that baffled and perplexed the detective.

"Understand, madam, I shall learn all I want from other sources before two days are over. I merely give you the opportunity to redeem yourself."

"Which I do not accept."

"Very well. Then the law must take its course."

He rose and left the room.

At the door he spoke to a police agent who had accompanied him.

"I leave this house and this lady under your charge. See that she does not escape. If she asks to see me before night, send for me. If she keeps silent, arrest her at six to-night and convey her to the Tombs. Here is your warrant."

He handed a written document to the officer. Miss Lacy listened quietly, but with a perturbed face, to the conversation, evidently intended for her benefit. But she made no remark, as she withdrew into the house and shut the door.

The detective walked away.

His footsteps were now turned in another direction, toward the poverty-stricken quarter of the city in which Frank Hearty resided.

A short time found him in the meanly-furnished apartments of the personage we have known as Aunt Kitty. Frank was not present.

The astute officer now began a series of sharp questionings of this lady. He displayed a knowledge of certain things which she deemed known only to herself that surprised and scared her.

"Your employer does not pay you very well, that is certain," he remarked, glancing around him, "or you would live in better quarters than these. I think I can afford to increase your salary, in return for certain information."

"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," replied Aunt Kitty, with a mingled look of greed and fear.

"Here is your bird in hand," he replied, laying a handful of money on the table.

"I ask you to answer no questions, except to tell me the name of the person from whom you draw your salary."

She counted the money. It was much more than she had imagined. The detective laid his hand upon it.

"His name?" he asked.

"Jacob Peale."

"His residence?"

"I do not know."

"Are you telling me the truth?"

"It is the gospel truth," she solemnly replied, as she stretched her two hands greedily for the money.

When the detective reached his office on his return, he found Jake Price waiting for him.

"Well, have you anything?" he asked.

"Yes. The man of the Park. I have tracked him to his house."

"Good. His name is Wilson Kite?"

"No, it is Jacob Peale."

"Prime! The old woman told the truth, then! We have our fox out of cover at last!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

"I do not know if you two gentlemen are acquainted. If not, I shall be happy to introduce you to each other."

The somewhat mocking voice in which these words were spoken was that of Detective Dodge. The two gentlemen addressed were Julius Marsden and Horace Bidding.

They had met by chance in the detective's office, on the same errand, and were staring at each other with wide open eyes.

"Julius Marsden!" gasped the one.

"Harry Birdwell!" exclaimed the other.

"Birdwell?" cried the detective. "You are mistaken. This gentleman's name is Bidding."

The gentleman in question had grown very red and confused. He hastened to explain.

"Birdwell is—only a name I took—in my wild days."

"I see," answered the detective, coolly.

"Since you have come back to honorable civilization you have resumed your old and honored name."

"Yes, yes; that is it, precisely."

"I am glad to meet you again, at any rate," said Marsden, holding out his hand. "Though I did not expect to meet you here."

"Nor I you," answered Bidding, taking the proffered hand.

"The most remarkable feature in the case," remarked the detective, in his coolest tone, "is that you are here on the same errand. Both in search of a street boy whom you were charitable enough to adopt."

"Eh?" cried Bidding, staring with surprise.

"Hey?" ejaculated Marsden.

"It was an extraordinary coincidence," continued the detective. "There is nothing like it in the history of charity. And it was very ugly in the boy to deceive you both; to be engaged as a clerk in Mr. Marsden's office at the same time that he was playing the young gentleman in Mr. Bidding's mansion."

"What is that you say?" cried Bidding.

"It is impossible," ejaculated Marsden.

"I admit that it is impossible. But it is true, for all that," responded the cool detective.

"There are some other odd coincidences in this matter," he continued.

"It is very odd, for instance, that two gentlemen, engaged in the same charitable enterprise, should have known each other years ago at Red Gulch, Nevada."

"It is equally odd that a mine-owner died there about that time, and left a son, who was sent by his guardian to New York, and turned loose to vegetate into a street urchin."

"Another oddity is that the Blue Stone Mine, left by will to this deserted youth, has recently panned out into a paying property, and that suddenly three personages have become charitably disposed toward that young vagrant."

These satirical words were differently received by the two listeners.

Bidding looked like a dog that has been caught in the act of stealing a piece of steak.

Marsden also wore a guilty look at first but quickly recovered his composure.

"It is, as you say, quite interesting that we should both be taken with a charitable intention toward the same person at the same time. Yet I cannot say much for my charity. I simply employed a wide-awake lad at a small salary. But, you say there were three charitable persons. Who was the third?" he quickly asked, as if to change the subject.

"Wilson Kite."

They both perceptibly started.

"You know him, I presume?"

"Yes," they both admitted.

"I cannot say much for his charity. It is to him the disappearance of the boy is due. And he would have disappeared forever only for a slight contingency I will show you the contingency."

He rose, walked to an inner door, and opened it. Through it, to the utter astonishment of the gentlemen, Frank Hearty walked into the room.

But he was quite a different personage from the boyish Frank they had known. During his six months' absence he had developed from boyhood to manhood, and though small in size, had a manly expression of face.

A simultaneous cry of astonishment came from the gentlemen.

"The young gentleman before you is past his twenty-first year, and able to dispose of his property at his will. Perhaps you would like to hear your *protege's* story?"

"We certainly should," they cried in concert.

"Then Frank shall tell it for himself."

Frank had stood during these words regarding his pair of would-be benefactors with a curious smile. He now seated himself.

"I have nothin' ag'in' Mr. Bidding and Mr. Marsden," he remarked. "Maybe they tried to play it on me. I dunno 'bout that. But I know I got the best o' that hoodle, and we're quits on *that* score. Don't mind tellin' where I've been and what's been doin'."

He proceeded to relate the story of his adventures to a highly interested audience. The detective supplemented it with particulars of which Frank was not aware.

"Now, gentlemen, you know just how the matter stands," remarked the detective. "It is my notion that the law has a claim on Wilson Kite. If a criminal trial takes place your evidence may be needed."

"We will give it," they cried, in revengeful tones. "He has always been a rascal."

"There is one more affair which I am anxious to probe. There is a curious mystery about that house."

"Yes," cried Bidding, eagerly. "Those secret rooms!"

"Some sort of machinery," said Marsden, coolly. "But I would like to know how it works."

"Then come with me. I am about to arrest Kite, and search his house."

Two hours afterward, a party of five or six persons rung the bell of a house in the upper portion of the city, and asked to see Mr. Peale.

They were admitted. A moment afterward, the gentleman of the house entered, a tall, stoutish personage, with a rather handsome face.

He looked with some surprise at his visitors.

"To what do I owe the honor of this visit?" he asked.

As he did so, a change came over his face. His eyes had fallen on Marsden and Bidding.

"You owe it, Mr. Kite, which I believe is your correct name," said the detective, "to a little business which the courts of justice of the city of New York have with you. You are my

prisoner, sir. Arrested for the abduction and attempted murder of one Francis Archer."

His hand fell on the shoulder of the astounded man.

For a moment he stood still. Then he seemed to blaze into indignation. He flung the detective's hand from his shoulder.

"This is an outrage!" he exclaimed. "I know nothing of Francis Archer! This is a scheme of robbery! Within there! Guard my house and protect my property against these burglars!"

He sprang wildly for the bell. Ere he could reach it he was grasped again by the detective.

"One moment, Mr. Kite," he said coolly. "If you know no Francis Archer, perhaps you may know this youth."

He pointed to the door of the apartment, in which stood the form of Frank Hearty, who had just entered.

A cry of mortal terror burst from the lips of the detected villain.

"Take it away!" he yelled. "It is a ghost—a spirit! He is dead—dead—dead! He has come back to haunt me!"

At a sign from the detective, Frank disappeared. The villain stood cowering with terror, glaring at the spot. The detective signed to one of his companions.

"Take him!" he said briefly.

The prisoner was removed without resistance from the room. He was utterly overcome with the shock he had received.

"And now, gentlemen," continued the detective. "I must make a legal search of this house, in evidence of this man's crimes. I wish your aid and assistance."

The house was quickly invaded. Two servants only were found in it, who were put under guard. If there were others they were absent.

The first movement of the detective was to examine the papers of the prisoner. He found, in his office, abundance of these relating to the Blue Stone Mine. In one drawer of the desk an interesting document was found, a bill of sale of the Blue Stone Mine from Francis Archer to Wilson Kite.

The detective started on reading this.

"What have you to say to this, Frank?"

"It looks like my writin'," cried Frank, in astonishment. "But I know I tore the one I signed into mince meat."

"There is some trick here," remarked the detective. "But we can let this stand for the present. The mystery of this house needs to be first investigated."

The search of the house now began. To all appearance it was a three-story mansion. The rooms were all open and readily entered. There was no indication of the secret chambers.

The detective looked at him doubtfully.

"Where are your secret rooms, Frank?"

"In the fourth story," declared Frank, quietly. "You have not used your eyes enough."

The officer quickly threw up the window and looked out. Frank was right. The house did rise to the height of another story. But it was a blank wall. There were no windows above the third floor.

"Skylights," suggested Frank. "Who's tellin' a sailor's yarn now?"

With great interest and curiosity some method of entrance to this fourth story was sought. But not the slightest indication of its existence could be found.

"I have sent for a person who perhaps can explain this mystery," remarked the detective. "Meanwhile let us look underground. I would like to examine Frank's dungeon."

The party descended to the cellars. Here they had no difficulty in finding the dark room in which Frank had been confined.

There was no trace of the locked doors of which they had been told. The doors all stood open. But the most surprised of the party was Frank himself.

The detective looked suspiciously at the boy.

"What have you been giving us, Frank?"

Without a reply Frank ran hastily, and almost wildly, from the room, followed by the others. Reaching the first floor, he hastened to the rear door, and made his way to the garden.

"Here is t'other end of it," he cried, leading the way to the summer-house.

Looking at the floor of this, a square cut, as for a trap-door, was visible. But, on seeking to lift it, it refused to yield.

"Get tools and wrench it loose," ordered the detective.

At this moment one of the men he had left in the house came and spoke to him. He turned and followed him thither.

"She is in here," said the man, pointing to an apartment.

The detective entered. Clare Lacy stood before him!

"You have sent for me," she remarked.

"Yes," he replied. "It will be necessary for you to give some information, Miss Lacy. Wilson Kite has been arrested. We are searching his house. It covers mysteries which only you can reveal."

"You have wasted time in bringing me here, if that is your purpose," was her cold rejoinder. "I will say nothing to criminate Wilson Kite."

There was a look in her eyes that baffled and perplexed the detective.

"Do you know whom you are defending? A man who is in his heart a murderer. Would you like to keep the secrets of a man who could seek to murder his ward in cold blood?"

"No. But I do not believe that. The boy is alive. And Wilson Kite does not mean him any personal injury."

"He does not, eh? Follow me, Miss Lacy. I will open your eyes."

He led the way to the underground dungeon.

"Where is the entrance to the tunnel?" he asked.

She looked at the continuous wall with startled eyes. Then she rushed to a point of the wall and felt it with her fingers.

"It has just been walled up," she cried, in hollow tones. "The mortar is fresh!"

"And blackened to resemble the rest of the wall. Now come this way, Miss Lacy."

He now led to the summer-house in the garden. The men whom he had left there at work had just succeeded in prying up the nailed-down door. Beneath them appeared a space of unbroken earth. The well-like cavity had disappeared.

The eyes of the woman opened wider than before.

"There is some terrible meaning in this," she faltered. "What am I to understand?"

"Wilson Kite saw Frank Archer just now, and quailed as if he had seen a ghost," replied the detective. "Why? Because he believed that his ward was in that tunnel, and that his crime was safe beyond all human discovery. He has sealed up both ends of the tunnel! Need I tell you why? Do you still care to keep the secrets of such a man?"

"No, no," she cried, in a shuddering tone. "This crime releases me from all obligations to my wicked uncle, for he is my uncle. What do you wish of me?"

"The secrets of this house. The mystery of the hidden rooms."

"Follow me," she briefly answered.

She led the way to a room on the third floor. Reaching this she opened a door which led to a small, chamber, completely unfurnished.

Advancing to the frame of the door between the rooms she caught in her hand a section of the molding. Moving this in a peculiar manner it slipped aside, revealing a narrow cavity, within which they saw a chain, with a ring at its end.

"Leave that room," she demanded.

They obeyed.

"Now observe. You will see something curious."

Catching the ring in her hand she gave it a sharp pull.

The next moment, to their astonishment, a platform, like the floor of an elevator, quickly descended before their eyes.

It reached and rested on the floor of the unfurnished room, which it exactly covered. On it was visible a dining table, chairs, and the other furniture of a well appointed dining room.

"Enter," she briefly said.

The curious party did so.

"You cannot see the machinery by which this is done," she remarked. "It is all concealed in the thickness of the walls."

She released the ring, which she had attached to a small hook. It pulled back into the cavity, and at the same instant the floor on which they stood began to ascend.

"It is raised by heavy weights," she said.

After a brief space the floor rested.

They appeared to be in a small dining room, with doors opening right and left.

A loud cry broke from Frank. He sprang to the nearest door and flung it open.

"See!" he cried. "I am back again. I guess you won't believe now I was gittin' off fairy stories."

He ran excitedly from room to room, followed by his curious companions.

The secret was out. The floor of the dining-room was arranged to act as an elevator, and could be made to rise and lower at will. It was the only means of entrance to and exit from the handsomely-furnished rooms in which Frank had been so long held captive.

Clare noticed their astonishment with a smile of satisfaction.

"You will perceive," she remarked, "that there is a well-devised plan to prevent accidents. Whenever the elevator is in operation, both the doors leading to the dining-room are automatically locked; besides this, there are wires attached to the floor of this room, and also to the adjoining portions of the two neighboring rooms. When the weight of any person comes on this floor, or near to the doors outside, an electric signal is given below."

"Very neatly got up," exclaimed the detective. "It is the work of an artist. But are we to understand that this elaborate contrivance and these elegantly-furnished rooms were all prepared for the benefit of this boy?"

"Not at all," replied Clare, with a light laugh. "It was got up for a very different purpose. I can tell you the whole story, as I happen to know it well. This mansion was built by an eccentric personage, who had a great horror of noise and disturbance, and was in love with solitude. He had this upper story built in such a way that no sound could enter from the streets. And he arranged matters so that no one could intrude on him against his will."

"He had a strong talent for curious mechanical contrivances, and had this floor elevator arranged as the only entrance to the secret rooms, in which most of his time was spent."

"There, gentlemen, you have the whole mystery in a nut-shell. This eccentric individual died suddenly. His mansion, with all its secrets, was bought by my uncle, Wilson Kite. I resided here in my childish days, and knew all its mysteries."

This recital was listened to with the utmost attention.

"There is one thing more," remarked the detective. "This document, signed by Francis Archer. Do you know the mystery of this signature? Frank here both acknowledges and denies it."

"He wrote the name, but not on that paper. The signature is on a thin film of paper, fastened here by invisible gum. Very likely a little water will remove it, and reveal the fraud."

They were now assembled in the dining-room. She touched a spring in a secret place in the wall, and at once the floor began to descend. The moment they had stepped from it into the adjoining room it rose again.

"That spring releases one of the weights, and lets it down," she explained. "But there is another weight sufficient to lift the floor when no one is on it. The only way it can be kept down, is by pulling down the chain and fastening it to the hook."

The whole mystery was revealed, and the party left the house, fully satisfied with the result of their explorations.

We must hurry on to the close of this interesting episode in Frank Archer's strange history.

As for Wilson Kite there was no prosecution against him for any of his crimes except that of attempted defrauding of his ward.

For this he was sentenced to two years imprisonment, and forced to disgorge his ill-gotten wealth.

This amounted to more than a million dollars, while the mine was still yielding richly.

There was no trouble in identifying Frank as the heir. Aunt Kitty confessed that he had been placed in her care, when little more than an infant, by a man who called himself Jacob Peale, but whom she recognized in Wilson Kite. She had ever since been paid an annual sum for his keep and for her silence.

Clare Lacy testified that her uncle had acknowledged to her that Frank Hearty, the street vagrant, was really his ward.

And Messrs. Marsden and Bidding, when questioned by a lawyer, acknowledged the truth, that they had kept sight of the boy since his childhood.

But they both declared, what nobody believed that they had taken charge of the boy from their old friendship for his father.

Together with his great wealth the mansion in which he had been imprisoned became the property of Frank Hearty, now known by his right name of Francis Archer. But he had had a dose of its secret rooms, and never used them except as a show place for curious visitors. But he lived like an emperor in the rooms below.

Nor did he forget in his prosperity the friends of his adversity. Aunt Kitty was made comfortable for life. "The boys" were all placed in respectable situations. Detective Dodge was made rich enough to retire from business as a gentleman of leisure. And even Messrs. Marsden and Bidding found a sure relief in any money troubles in Frank's long purse.

THE END.

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